IMAGINATIVE TALES ON OTHER PLANETS

SPACE ADVENTURES

BIG NEW COLLECTION

NO. 10 • SPRING 1970

• ICD 50¢

(Classics)

WORLD WITHOUT AIR
by Henry Kuttner

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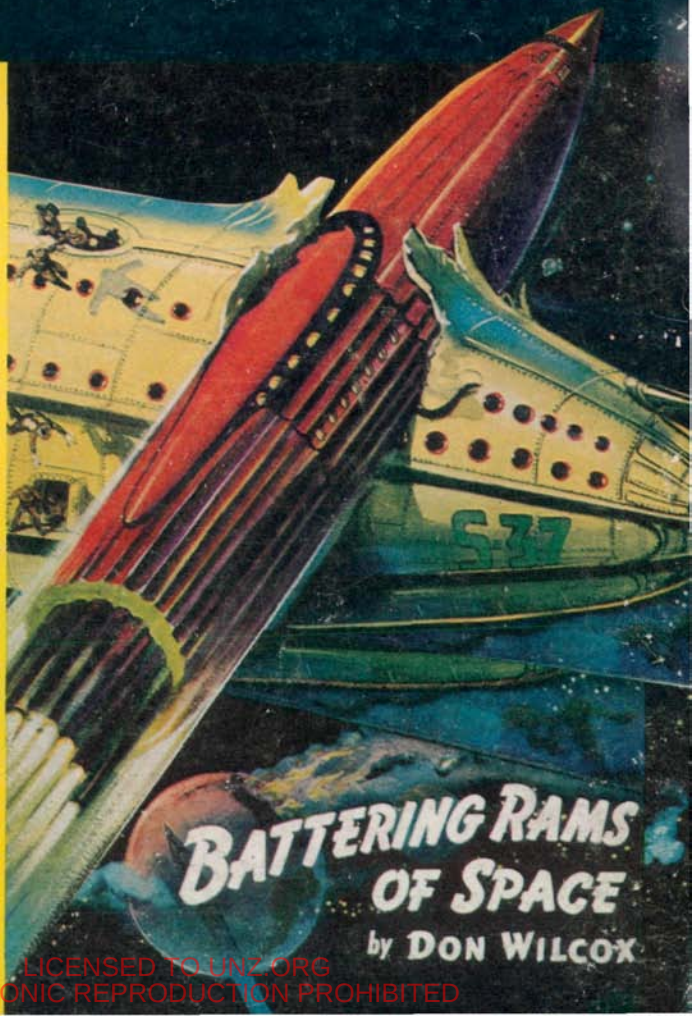
by Ross Rocklynne

SATELLITE OF DESTRUCTION
by Burt B. Listen

CALL OF DUTY
by J. J. Allerton

TO THE VICTORS
by H. B. Hickey



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ATOMIC AIRSHIP OF MARS

by HENRY GADE

The highly scientific aircraft of Mars is shown in the back cover painting by James B. Settles. It is a ship driven by atomic power rocket motors

MARS, the fourth planet of the solar system, is perhaps the oldest of all of Sol's family in the light of possible advancement of its living forms, whatever they may be. Thus, when envisaging the airship of this world, we find that we must take into consideration Man's own position on his own planet.

Today, we know that atomic power is in the future reach of science. And not so far in the future either. Therefore, since Mars cooled faster, its intelligent life has had more time to advance their science, and atomic power should already be part of their daily lives, if not in use for thousands of years.

Let us picture this airship, which is partially a spaceship, in actuality, of Mars. Streamlining, as on Earth, must have advanced until the ultimate non-resisting form was reached, the projectile-teardrop shape. Thus we have a ship with a sharp tail, and a less-sharp pose, streamlined in a sweeping curve from front to rear.

Very small fins and steering rudders are the only impediment to air-friction.

The airship of Mars is capable of flight into the rarefied atmosphere, as high as thirty miles above the surface of the planet, and can attain a speed of ten thousand miles per hour.

The rocket motors, which are located directly amidships, are based on the destruction of the atoms of U-235 or some such similar isotope of uranium, and the energy, in the form of steam, less dense than the vacuum in an ordinary light bulb, is utilized through rocket tubes located on the sides of the ship rather than in the rear, as might be supposed. The reason for this is maneuverability, which is a delicate and sure thing in a ship powered by atomic power. So delicate is the adjustment possibility of atomic steam-blasts, that the course of the ship could be changed by one ten-thousandth of a degree of arc with absolute accuracy.

It must be assumed that the airship of Mars could be set to an automatic control which could be so mathematically perfect that it could cause the ship to make a trip around tte entire planet and land within a few feet of a previously designated landing point.

The directional apparatus would be a very complicated mechanism, and compass directions would be geared up to an infinitely fine hair-line cross-sight which would be trained on a fixed star and be electromagnetically corrected during the whole trip to obviate any chance of diversion of the compass through mineral deposits in the soil below.

Mars has two moons, both very small, and both very close to the planet itself. With the ship of the Martians, it would be possible to reach these moons, and even land on them, since the distance would not be too great to allow for enough speed to overcome gravity.

Thus, we would discover that the Martian airship is constructed for travel, not only in Mars' stratosphere, but in space itself. The only factor that would prevent actual travel to Earth itself would be the impossibility of carrying enough water to provide fuel for such an immense distance. Water, unfortunately, dispensed as steam, bulks too greatly to enable a rocket craft to carry enough fuel for interplanetary travel.

However, if Mars has such ships as these, it is conceivable that they may, some day, solve the secret of breaking down, not only U-235, but the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen, which would mean an infinite source of power from as little as a gallon of water. A molecule of steam, no matter how finely it is divided, would be comparatively huge compared to a shattered atom of its elements, hydrogen and oxygen.

The interior of the Martian ship would be so constructed as to allow the Martian to accomplish everything electrically. High speed, and high acceleration would preclude much physical moving around. Pneumatic seats would take up the shock of starting, of high acceleration. Compressed air would keep the air pressure at Mars' surface level, since the atmosphere of Mars is very thin and perhaps extremely rare even at a height of only a mile or so.

The airship of Mars is certainly the finest piece of aerial engineering in the solar system.

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BATTERING

by DON WILCOX

Like hellish demons these ships roared out of space to blanket Earth with fiery gas; and the lives of millions depended on Lester Allison, June O'Neil, and the battering rams

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RAMS of SPACE

"UNTIL these stone walls crumble away," the beautiful girl in Lester Allison's arms breathed.

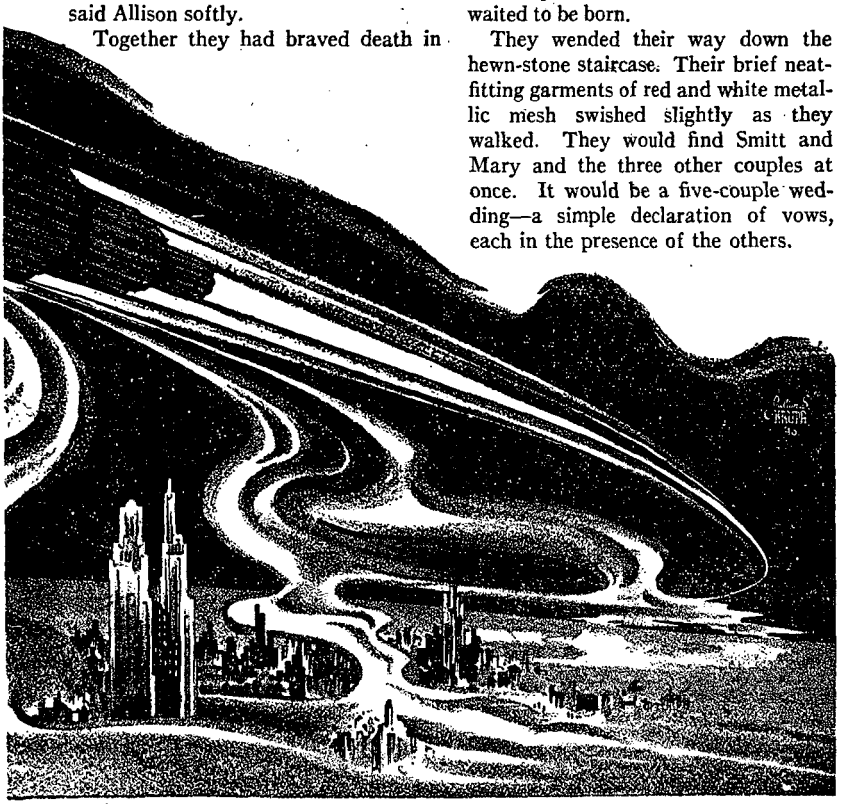
The torchlights glowed upon the red rock walls and shone in June O'Neill's face. The devotion in her dark eyes was the very heart of Lester Allison's new-found world.

"We'll be married this very hour," said Allison softly.

Together they had braved death in these underground chasms of Mercury. Allison had undergone the fatal ritual of the Floating Chop, outwitted his would-be executors and come out alive. Together he and June O'Neill had survived the devastations of Mercury's strange war.

Now the Mercurians were all gone. The slate of the former civilization had been wiped clean. A new civilization waited to be born.

They wended their way down the hewn-stone staircase. Their brief neat-fitting garments of red and white metallic mesh swished slightly as they walked. They would find Smitt and Mary and the three other couples at once. It would be a five-couple wedding—a simple declaration of vows, each in the presence of the others.



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A dull roar sounded from far up the space ship runway, and Allison and June looked at each other and smiled. It seemed humorous, somehow, for the empty robot ship which had been transporting the freed Earth slaves back home, to roll back into port for its final load. The final load—the five couples—would never go back. They had decided to remain on Mercury.

"We've found our own little corner of the universe," June mused. "We'll let the rest of the worlds go by."

Allison's smile vanished and his strong face showed a flicker of worry. The roar of the approaching ship had an unfamiliar ring.

Perhaps it needed overhauling. Perhaps—

But in another minute, it would roll into view in the spacious red-walled cavern known as the Red Suburb. Allison and June strolled on.

The robot ship had taken all the other survivors of the Mercury slave raids back to the earth. These five couples had been chosen by Allison for the final load. He had chosen with care. And then, as he had hoped and planned, they had made the momentous decision: they would forsake the earth in favor of these deep rich caverns of Mercury.

Not only had nature favored these caverns. By a curious twist of fortune a genius of science, recently deceased, had established what was perhaps the world's most unique laboratory here. Allison and his little party had inherited it. And the secrets that went with it. And the amazingly facile machines that rolled out and fashioned the marvelous and inexhaustible red and black metals.

Already Allison and the other four men, all of them mechanically minded, had delved into the laboratory mysteries and gone to work on blueprints of their own.

"Listen!" Allison stopped short. "That roar—"

June paled. "That can't be our robot ship!"

The torches along the runway flickered, deep shadows on the high red walls wavered. The low-roaring ship rolled into view.

It was a huge silvery fighting ship with an ominous-looking gun poised over its nose—a *stranger!*

"To the shadows!" Allison gasped, seizing June by the hand.

IN response to a widespread demand from our readers, we asked Don Wilcox to bring back those two sterling characters of his, Lester Allison and June O'Neill, who first appeared in AMAZING STORIES in the June, 1940 issue.

Pleased with the success of his "Slave Raiders from Mercury," Author Wilcox has written this entertaining sequel. The plot is entirely original, but the two principal characters face peril and heroic sacrifice with the same courage that evoked such an enthusiastic response from AMAZING STORIES fans.

"In "Slave Raiders from Mercury," Lester Allison, taking a day off at the circus, found himself in a sideshow exhibit—a rocket ship, which had somehow come down to Earth. Also in the ship, whither she had fled to escape the unwelcome attentions of an over-zealous suitor, was June O'Neill.

WHAM!—the rocket ship suddenly took off into the void, and our two young people presently found themselves exiled on Mercury. There they became enmeshed in the cunning clutches of Jason Kilhide, a confidence man from Earth who had turned all of Mercury into a profitable racket of which he was the guiding genius.

Kilhide's self-returning space ships were used to kidnap young people from Earth to become slaves of the Dazzaloz, the ruling class of Mercury.

Lester Allison nearly gave up his life in combatting this evil system, but finally succeeded in destroying the last vestiges of this corrupt regime, Kilhide included. Thereupon he and June O'Neill and four other young Earth couples—the rest had been sent back home—decided to spend their lives on Mercury, a haven now where they would never be molested, and in addition would be able to make use of the marvelous scientific achievements which Kilhide had unwillingly left behind.

Now, in this sequel, we have Lester Allison and June O'Neill confronted with another great crisis, on which solution depends their very lives.—Ed.

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THROUGH the shadows they ran. They fled over the dark upper paths toward the red metal door of the laboratory stronghold. The four other couples raced in and the heavy door closed.

"That's no Earth ship!" someone gasped.

It was well known that the earth hadn't got far in its attempts to build space ships. The robot ship, built in this very laboratory, was far superior to any Earth-made product.

But this big silvery newcomer was the grandest thing Allison or any of the others had ever seen. And the most terrible. Its huge spotlight roved over the cavern walls curiously. The ten onlookers shrank back from the laboratory window, even though they were well concealed by a camouflage of filigreed rock and many yards of distance.

"I don't like the look of that gun," said Smitt.

The silvery space ship came to a stop, then began slowly turning around in its tracks.

"Whether it's friend or foe," said Allison, his face tensed for decision, "we're ten against the universe now. These caverns are ours to protect. We've no defenses but our wits and a few guns."

"Four," said Smitt. "Only four guns."

"One apiece for each of you men," Allison directed.

He hastily outlined a plan. The men would take positions along the upper cliff paths near the ceilings and listen closely. If the newcomers were friendly, Allison would give them a cordial welcome. If they were hostile, he would stage a bluff.

"But if worst comes to worst, fire your guns as if there were hundreds of you, not just four."

June and the other girls had already snapped off the lights through the laboratory corridors, for a glimpse of these immense metal works would be certain temptation to any invader.

"And we'll lock all the rooms," June volunteered, "and hide the blueprints—"

"And hide yourselves," Allison commanded. "If they're looking for treasures and get a glimpse of *you*—"

He broke off quickly, kissed June intensely—a kiss that would be long remembered—and with a hastily uttered, "Weddings later!" he went forth.

The ship's airlocks had not yet opened. Oxygen-masked figures looked out curiously from the portholes, doubtlessly wondering whether human life would be found here.

Slipping through the deep shadows, Allison stationed his four men along the cliff paths, then scampered down into a chasm that opened upon the space ship runway. With a purposeful air he walked into view over the red metal footbridge. In his hand he swung a long black metal ax casually.

Halfway across the bridge he stopped.

S-201

Allison's eyes narrowed. The ship's nose was pointed back toward the take-off channel through which it had descended. This couldn't be an Earth ship. The earth had built nothing but experimental ships which were little better than death traps. And yet the name that adorned that nose was composed of an English letter and an Arabic numeral!

A man emerged from the airlocks, took a few steps toward Allison, stopped abruptly, removed his oxygen helmet, and spoke—*in English!*

"What's going on down here?" the stranger drawled.

"So you're from the earth too," said Allison in a cordial tone.

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"Don't insult me," the man answered with a touch of cynicism.

HE opened his oxygen suit down from the throat and fished a cigarette from an inside pocket. The cigarette was slender and orange-colored, and when he tapped it against his hand it lit.

"I assume you've been around some," said Allison, noting the man's easy adjustment to the light gravity of Mercury. "What's your purpose here?"

"You might call it a good-will tour," the stranger answered with a slight twist of his lips.

He didn't offer Allison a cigarette, but brushed past as if to ignore him. He glanced back as if noticing for the first time that the garments Allison wore were of fine metal mesh. Then he strode over toward the red footbridge, eying the rows of torchlights that trailed along the pathways into distant chasms.

He spent several minutes gazing through field glasses. No other people were to be seen. Again he turned his attention to things near at hand. He studied the well-worn paths and scarred walls. He rubbed his stubby hand over the silky red metal of the bridge. He looked at the scraps of metal on the ground, the black ax in Allison's hands, noted Allison's calm patient gaze.

"You must be lost," said the man, planting his stubby greenish hands on his hips. "Any more down here like you?"

"A few million," said Allison, allowing himself a healthy exaggeration as a precautionary measure. The stranger's manner hardly inspired trust.

"What are you? Traffic cop or somethin'?"

"If it's a good-will tour, I'm the reception committee," said Allison. "Ever hear of an old Earth custom of shaking hands?"

"Earth customs is *out*," said the man, walking back toward his ship. His speech was thick, reminding Allison of tough-guy talk. The man glanced back.

"*How* many million did you say?"

"Several."

During the next few minutes seventy or eighty uniformed men emerged from the ship. They milled around, unencumbered by space suits or helmets, breathing and stretching. An officer called them to order, and the scout with whom Allison had exchanged words mumbled something to them.

Then a third of the men got back into the ship, the rest followed close on the heels of the six officers who strode toward the footbridge.

"Stop!" Allison shouted. "You can't pass this bridge without a permit!"

They came on. They fell into military step and their thudding black boots set up a rhythmic echo. Their uniforms, now that their brown space suits had been removed, were a flashy silver with orange sashes and turban-shaped orange headdress. Modern pirates, thought Allison. Sashes, hats and pistol holsters bore the letter "S".

"Stop! I'll brain the first man who crosses this bridge!"

Allison shouted his threat at the top of his voice. He drew back to the farther end of the footbridge, swung his ax up for action and waited. The officers drew pistols and came on.

But the first boot that touched the bridge brought a hailstorm. *Zing-zing-zing!* Bullets clanged across the center of the span. Automatic guns chattered from somewhere in the upper shadows. The officers leaped back in surprise, and Allison silently prayed that Smitt and the other three men could keep up the illusion of a barrage, if necessary.

"Hold it!" the tall leader shouted, his hands jerking upward. "What the hell is this?"

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THE fifty orange and silver uniforms shrank back into a disorganized swarm. The low rumble of the defenders' unseen guns echoed away.

The officers went into a huddle with the scout and there was some rapid, quarrelsome talk. What about this self-confident fellow—was he really from Earth? What if he weren't crack-brained? Maybe there *were* a few millions of people down here. And maybe black axes weren't their only weapons. They had guns at least. Maybe they had explosives planted under this space ship landing . . . *S-s-sshl*

The swarm crowded back toward the ship and the conference went on for several minutes. Allison could hear little of what was said. The name "Sasho" recurred frequently throughout the conversation. Frequently the visitors' eyes roved speculatively toward Allison and toward the endless shadows that might conceal gunmen.

Gradually their attention shifted to some objects the officers had picked up off the ground. They crowded over the objects, pounded them together, scratched them with knives, scorched them with flame pistols. Allison saw that the objects were scraps of metal—specimens of red and black.

The timely gunfire and the fine metals must have made an impression. The leader of the group, a tall, suave-looking fellow, now came toward Allison with a great show of respect.

"We beg your pardon if we seemed —er—hasty." His manner was in extreme contrast to that of the first spokesman. "We're a good-will party from Venus."

Allison responded cautiously. The change of demeanor made him more suspicious than ever. He held fast to his bluff.

"This bridge is heavily guarded," said Allison. "I've had orders from the dictator to let no one through."

"Dictator, eh? What is he? An Earthman or something else?"

"He's like me," Allison answered noncommittally.

"Whatever he is, he's the man I want to see. Where can I find him?"

"You can't. Martial law is on," Allison declared.

"Hell!" The leader's polite manners were already wearing thin. "How can I get a message through to him?" he snapped.

"I'm his official spokesman. I'll handle your business," Allison purred.

"My business is diplomatic—and *secret!*"

"I'm a diplomatic spokesman," Allison lied, "authorized to handle secret business. That's what I'm here for."

"Have you got any documents to prove that?"

In answer Allison jerked his thumb into the air and a volley of bullets clattered against the nearby wall.

The leader shuffled nervously. "See here, I've come to get some promises from your big shot, whoever he is—"

"He makes no promises," Allison interrupted bluntly.

"Suppose the earth was about to be pounced on by some other planet. Which way would your dictator and his millions take a notion to jump? For or against?" the tall leader demanded.

"Neither," said Allison staunchly. "We tend to our own business."

The leader was pleased with the answer. He glanced at his group. Allison had the uncomfortable feeling that those restless uniforms were gradually gathering closer to him.

The leader engaged him with more questions.

"You know all about this place, do you? How many people there are? How many men under arms? What kind of weapons? What the people do for a

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living? What the birth rate is? How the government operates?"

ALLISON nodded. Naturally he knew the answers.

The leader held up a scrap of metal. "You know how this stuff is made?"

"It's rather complicated—"

"But *you know?*"

"What do you think?"

All at once it happened—so swiftly that the guns up in the shadows couldn't prevent it. The uniformed men flooded in on Allison and swept him across to their space ship. They forced him into the airlocks, and a moment later the big silvery invader went into action.

CHAPTER II

Double Trouble

JUNE O'NEIL couldn't believe it. Watching from the laboratory window she saw it begin.

Dread filled her heart. Across the open space toward the runway she ran, crying to Allison. She fell. She lay face down, her head half lifted. The torchlights before her were only dull blurs. The reality of the passing scene burned into her horrified mind as if it were being stamped with hot brands.

They had Lester Allison! The guns from the shadows didn't stop them. They carried him away at all costs. Bullets cut into the edge of the retreating invaders and men fell. But the plan went through. They had him!

Bullets blasted harmlessly against one side of the ship while it maneuvered about to facilitate a safe pick-up of the fallen bodies. The job was done, and slowly the silvery monster crept back toward the runway.

Now a familiar roar sounded. It was the empty robot ship. June came up on her fingers tensely. The robot ship was returning, after having taken the kidnapped slaves back to earth and freedom.

Down the runway it rolled, headed squarely for the big silver-nosed stranger. On it coasted—within thirty yards—

BLAM! Boom-brroommmm!

The big gun on the nose of the fighting ship blazed forth. The shell caught the black robot ship to one side of center. The black hull leaped.

It bounded from its course and rolled like a log into the precipitous ravine beneath the red bridge.

Out of the silvery monster rocket motors flashed fire. The big fighting ship shot up through the runway out of sight. Moments later its roar died away.

Allison's four aids, who had scurried down from the cliff paths, their automatic guns in full action, now trudged back from the mouth of the runway. Futile gesture—to pump bullets at a departing space boat! They were shocked past reason—shocked at their own helplessness. The silvery ship was gone!

They stopped and looked about. Nothing remained of the visit but some bits of bright uniform and a few pools of dark blood. And a few yards beyond—June O'Neil lying face down, her head in her arms. And the other girls back of her, white and trembling.

June hardly knew when the girls picked her up and helped her to a bed. The hours that followed were next to unendurable for everyone.

Nobody spoke of the weddings. There was no talk of the new civilization that had aroused so much enthusiasm a few hours before. Without Lester Allison, the nine of them were spokes of a wheel without a hub—or planets without a sun.

In time the men went to work on the

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returned robot ship. The heavy hull was wedged fast in the ravine. It was a small job, however, to turn out a power derrick from the metal works to lift it. A gleam of hope came up with the salvaged space vessel.

"Once we get this thing repaired," said Smitt, "we'll hike out after Allison and bring him back."

"Some capital city on Venus—that's where they took him," said Laughlin, one of the best scrappers in the bunch. His sharp ears had caught everything.

The robot ship groaned and came out of its trap, and the men engineered it into the fine laboratory Jason Killride had unwillingly left them and converted the big shop into a space ship hospital.

"Tell June not to grieve any more," Smitt kept saying to Mary, even managing to grin a little. We'll have him back before many days."

BUT Mary knew that June O'Neil's shock was too deep to be relieved by any spurious hopes.

The robot ship was badly damaged. The hull had suffered little, for Mercury metals were tough. But the instruments had been crippled. Intricate robot controls, governed by keys set in the laboratory, were more than the men could understand. The girls searched through the laboratory files, high and low, for explanatory diagrams, but without success.

The men experimented until they went gray with exhaustion. The sharp-faced, boyish Laughlin penetrated the mysteries farther than anyone. But he saw that it would take months for even him to conquer the problem.

At last they were forced to accept the bitter fact. The robot ship was dead. The four men and five women were here for better or for worse. And their guiding spirit, Lester Allison, was gone—to an unknown destination.

ABOARD THE S-20, Allison shot through the starry blackness toward Venus.

If rocket motors could be stopped by a man's inward rebellion, the S-20 would have gone dead before it budged from the Red Suburb of Mercury. But Allison's anguish was a powerless thing. He was the victim of something hostile and vicious. It was up to him to face reality.

Why had they taken him prisoner? He didn't know.

Not until after the hubbub over the fifteen dead or wounded men had calmed down did the Venusians pay much attention to him. They had him in their toils, and that seemed to be as much as they cared about for the present.

Left to his own devices, Allison made himself comfortable on a bench in the fore end of the ship. He pretended to be absorbed in the heavens. Actually he kept his eyes on the pilots, studied their dials, memorized their manipulations.

A transparent partition separated Allison from the men at the controls, but once the door was left open, and he could hear them discussing whether they should swing around past the earth. The officers pressed the suggestion upon them. They had plenty of time, since their Mercury job had been dispensed with so swiftly.

So the S-20 swung past the earth.

The very sight of Allison's home planet uncorked a great deal of talk that might be called sentimental. The sentiment was—pure hatred. Hatred of the earth seemed to be bred into these men. And yet Allison couldn't get over the notion that they were Earth men.

Their skin, he noticed, carried a grayish pigment—almost green; but this could have been a peculiarity induced by the climatic conditions of Venus, perhaps. Still, there were other phys-

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ical oddities: the noses were inclined to be flat, and the hands short and stubby.

But the talk was definitely right out of America—in fact, it might have been borrowed wholesale from a den of American gangsters. To hear them cursing the earth in the most colorful of Earth slang was incongruous enough. But when they began recounting some of their experiences *on Earth,* it was more than Allison could fathom for the moment.

HE gathered that each of these men had made a trip to the earth at some time or other, although, the earth had been innocent of the fact that their ships had landed. Each man had gone there to commit murders or other crimes as a part of their initiation into the service of what they described as the "Sasho Empire." They bragged of their crimes.

Allison wasn't sure what it was all about. His chief business was to observe how the pilot steered the ship.

Presently the big pearly white ball that was the earth inflated before them until it filled a fourth of the sky. The men busied themselves with telescopes trying to discern some sort of fresh scar. Allison gathered that they or their brothers under the Sasho banner had something to do with the formation of the scar they were looking for—a line of black on the North American continent.

There was much talk about Sasho's Empire, Sasho's other ships, Sasho's plan of destruction. But no scar was seen. Thick atmosphere and continents of clouds made it impossible to see anything. So the S-20 pulled away straight for Venus.

Now the officers began to stew about what they would report to Sasho.

They argued over what they had seen on Mercury, and when they boiled it down they hadn't seen anything. They had plenty of "evidence," they said, that a population of "several million Earth people"—American offshoots, apparently—lived there!

They began to make excuses to each other for not actually invading the place.

But the tall flat-nosed leader with the gold "S" medallion on his chest said what the hell, there wouldn't have been any point in sacrificing any more life. They had picked up an official spokesman who was A-1. Did Sasho expect them to capture the confounded dictator of the planet himself? They'd lost enough men as it was.

Allison chuckled to himself at this point. They'd swallowed his "dictator" yarn, hook, line and sinker!

The officers argued some more, and ate, and smoked orange-colored cigarettes—and agreed that they'd better cook up a story that would sound good to Sasho, and do it right now!

Thereupon Yawman, the tall leader, called Lester Allison to the conference table and the other officers gathered around. There were microphones to pick up all the talk, and amplifiers, so that everyone aboard would know what was decided on.

Yawman paced about, slapping his orange sash against his knee, and doped out a story. They had got into the underground world at Mercury, he said, and had had to march two hundred miles hoping to get in touch with the dictator—only to find him away, gone to suppress some "rebellions!" But they *did* communicate with him and he gave them the Honorable Allison as his spokesman!

"That means we're banking on you, Honorable Allie," Yawman said with a slight taunt. "If you like to live, play the game. If you make Sasho any false promises and your dictator don't back

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you up, it's your neck, not ours—see?"

"I'll make no promises that my government won't back to the limit," Allison answered.

He wondered how far he would have to go with his fabricated "dictator" and the non-existent "millions of people." Certainly he had no intentions of revealing that there were only nine persons standing guard over the world's finest metal mills!

"Then we're all set," Yawman said.

The tall Venusian went over the high points of the story again, to be sure no one would get crossed up. He added that on the way back on their "two hundred mile march," they had bumped into a "thousand rebels" and fought their way through, and *that* accounted for their dead and wounded!

SOMEONE ventured to doubt that they would have stopped to pick up their dead under such fierce gunfire.

Yawman considered and said, "Right! We wouldn't."

Thereupon the officers threw the dead soldiers overboard by way of the disposal chute—not neglecting first to loot them of everything but their uniforms.

One of the wounded men—and Allison recognized him to be the surly scout who had first approached him at the red bridge—got angry at these proceedings. He threatened to spill the whole truth to Sasho.

His threats were somewhat of a mistake. The officers exchanged glances and dragged the luckless scout to the disposal chute, and his pleadings became an hysterical wail, but down he went to join the other corpses. There were no further "disagreements."

VENUS WELLED up out of the velvet heavens, bluish and bright with fluffy atmospheric storms under the sunlight.

Allison followed the dials as if the landing were his own responsibility. Mentally he was fast becoming a pilot. He anticipated several of the pilot's moves. He watched the colored lines come and go through the transparent chart, clicking off the miles of distance. He felt the cushioning effect of the atmosphere.

The counter-motors gave him a sickening sensation of falling in the opposite direction. Allison wanted to faint but he held fast, snatching at the last detail of that most perilous process—landing.

"On your toes, Honorable Allie!" barked Yawman with a touch of scorn. And then the ship set down on the tarmac.

It came to a rolling stop on the broad landing field. Blue domes of a Venusian capital were on the horizon. Yawman clipped a pair of handcuffs to each of Allison's strong wrists and Allison found himself linked to two husky silver and orange-clad soldiers.

Radio messages had been active during the last few minutes. Now Allison learned what was in the air: an inspection. Sasho had called for a space ship assembly for this very hour. It was already in progress. The crew of the S-20 would just have time to make it.

"He might have given us an hour's notice," one of the officers grumbled, hastily donning a fresh orange sash.

"He's damned full of whims," griped another.

"Probably getting in a sweat to move ahead with his plan of destruction," Yawman commented. "Better go light on the crabbing. There'll be some promotions in the air after we start scorch the earth. Sasho knows what he's about."

Allison marched out with the others

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dazedly. It was breath-taking to step on the soil of Venus. Under more favorable conditions, it might have been a glorious thrill. As it was, the very atmosphere seemed charged with ominous electricity.

The vast wide-open space port was studded with big ships—fighting ships, dozens of them. Some were larger than the S-20, with bulky barrel-like hulls that might have been made to carry gigantic oil tanks.

The sky fighters were lined up in a long row, their noses even and their guns aimed in the same directions. Standing in their shadows were the uniformed crews, lined up in hard-boiled ranks that were almost defiant with stiffness.

YAWMAN barked rapid orders to get his men arranged in time. The soldiers on either side of Allison kept their hands back so that the handcuffs were out of sight.

"Silence!" Yawman snapped, and he fell in at the end of the line. The big military men of the Sasho Empire came along at a brisk pace.

Allison knew the Emperor Sasho at first glance. He was half a step ahead of the others—the big man with the hunched-down head and the huge chin, the heavy shoulders that squared out from above his ears. Bedecked in a distinctive uniform with sashes and medals and jewels, he was a blaze of color.

An ancient pharaoh, thought Allison, might have traded his second best crown for that flashy outfit. A pirate would have certainly cut throats for it.

Strange to say, Sasho carried no weapon but a small yellow quirt. This he wielded with such dexterity of his wrist that his shoulders scarcely moved.

Allison observed several samples of this deft whipping skill as the inspection party came down the line. One soldier had too much twist in his sash, and the Emperor lashed him across the fingers with a sharp reminder.

A member of the S-20 crew tried to make a last-minute adjustment of his own sash. A package of candy fell out. Sasho strode up in time to see it. His wrist flicked and the whip caught the luckless soldier lashingly across the face. The mark filled with blood, and Sasho gave a low cruel laugh. His voice was like the grating of rusty chains.

In front of Allison, Sasho paused, glaring at the odd red and white-mesh uniform. The hulking Emperor's chin jutted upward, his black mustache drew down, his eyes gathered into slits.

"What's this?" Sasho growled in his rusty-chain voice.

Allison's heart pounded. Sasho's guttural breathing was hot on his face.

Yawman spoke up. "Your majesty, that's our ambassador from Mercury."

Sasho gave an approving grunt. "Keep him on tap. I'll get around to him later. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a couple weeks."

The military party passed on. Allison wondered if they had noticed the handcuffs. Perhaps they were used to receiving their ambassadors in handcuffs.

CHAPTER III

The Cruel Napoleon

EMPEROR SASHO took his place upon his throne. It was high noon, as time on Venus went. He had just finished a hearty breakfast. He tapped an orange-colored cigarette, it lit, he placed it between his teeth.

Yellow teeth, they were, with twisting lips that tightened over them. He glanced at his handsome self in the pan-

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el mirrors, gave a self-satisfied grunt. That damned little wench with the stubborn chin and the stingy lips! She'd better keep her promise and come in today or he'd knock her ears down.

Involuntarily his hand fell on the long black bull whip and he lashed it out toward a mirror. He blew cigarette smoke out of his mouth, dropped the whip, pressed a button.

At his touch Sasho's business day officially began. The circular walls that formed his small private throne room *lifted*—panel mirrors and all—and folded into the lofty ceiling. This first daily shift of scenes was accompanied by buzzers and bells throughout the capital building. The Emperor Sasho was on his throne!

The throne, a sumptuous composite of steps, rostrum, desk, seat and Emperor, was now in full view before the oval-shaped room. The people came to their feet and stood at attention until Sasho cracked the long black bull whip. They re-seated themselves at the rows of desks, and the oval room resumed the hum of an immense business office.

The attendants and secretaries went on with their routine business. Here and there among them were new faces —persons who had come to the seat of government with their special problems, or who had been brought here because they had *become* problems!

Sasho sat smoking cynically. He liked this time of day. He liked to sit before the hall full of people, ready to whip out a final decision whenever his subordinates got into a deadlock. This was power!

Moreover, it was luxury. Sasho liked this time of day, because the shafts of sunlight shone down on his jewel-studded fingers and sent blades of colored light playing over his black marble table.

His eyes roved over the room. Those five old green-faced buzzards over there were rebels out of the Jagged Mountains, he'd bet. The Cutthroat Congress would make short work of them. And there, in the red and white, was that captive from Mercury.

If *he* was as easy as the three from the nations of Mars, there'd be no trouble on that score. One of the Mars ambassadors had committed suicide on the flame-cloud excursion to the earth. And what a juicy excursion that had been! Sasho smiled reminiscently to himself.

But wait till the real business began! Damned if he wouldn't fry the old earth down to a cinder! And to think —if he hadn't pulled out when he did, he'd have spent these last four decades in a cell! Four decades!

"Your majesty—"

"Well?"

"The young rebel I spoke to you about yesterday—"

"Send him up."

The attendant went back to a desk and directed a well set up boy to the throne. The boy failed to bow when he crossed onto the orange and silver rug. Sasho's black bull whip lashed out. The boy emitted a scream of pain. Attendants throughout the room laughed raucously.

THE attendant and the hurt, frightened boy mounted the steps. Sasho touched a button and the circular wall descended. The three of them were alone in the little throne room.

"So you're a rebel," Sasho growled. "You think because your father was a Venusian—a damned anti-Sasho Venusian!—that you won't have to bend to the Sasho Empire."

The boy was too scared to answer.

"You know what happens to boys that won't bend? We bend them!"

Sasho enjoyed the effect of his own

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words.

"If we can't bend their wills, we bend their bones, see? Listen! I'll let you hear how it feels to have your bones bent."

Sasho snapped a switch and an amplifier brought in a pandemonium of such terrible crying and screeching that the boy shrank back, tripped on the steps and lay trembling in a heap.

"Get up!" Sasho roared.

The attendant helped the boy back to the rostrum.

"How old are you?"

"He's ten," said the attendant when it became evident the boy couldn't answer.

"Ten!" Sasho muttered.

A twinge of something caught him. He cracked the bull whip at the attendant.

"Damn you! What do you mean by bringing ten-year-olds in here? Get the hell out!"

The walls shot up and telescoped into the ceiling. The boy and the attendant fled out into the open oval room, but the whip caught the attendant with four deep lashes before he scurried out of range.

A secretary of diplomatic affairs bowed onto the rug and mounted the rostrum.

"Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury awaits your pleasure."

"Ten!" Sasho muttered to himself.

He hated to admit it to himself, but kids were the only human beings he had the slightest sympathy for. His eyes pushed into slits. He had been ten when he fought his way out of prison and onto the Death Ship.

Of the seven hundred criminals who had fled the earth, he'd been the youngest—and the toughest! They had told him he was the toughest, and by Jupiter he had made their boast good. And now look where he was!

"Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury—"

Sasho didn't hear, for that hard-boiled, beautiful girl with the stubborn chin was coming over.

"The papers you ordered from the treasury office," the girl said, mounting the steps saucily.

"Your Majesty, the ambassador from—"

"Can't you see I'm busy!" Sasho barked, and the secretary of diplomatic affairs took his cue and scurried back.

"One moment on those treasury papers," Sasho growled.

The girl stopped with a faintly mocking smile. Sasho touched a button and the circular wall descended. He and the girl were alone.

"You couldn't be angry again this morning?" the girl said sarcastically, sitting down at the side of the desk.

"Those damned attendants!" Sasho lit a cigarette and tossed the pack across the desk top. "Bothering me with ten-year-old boys!"

"Absurd," said the girl, adding cunningly that the most important man on Venus should be occupied with more important things.

"On *Venus*, did you say?"

Privately Sasho thought of himself as the most important man in the entire solar system. His conquests of the past decades had cut a wide swath in interplanetary history. And this was only the beginning.

"You're the most important, the most powerful, and by far the most picturesque emperor that ever lived."

THE girl blew smoke into Sasho's face. He glanced at himself in a panel mirror, drew his chin up, pulled his mustaches down. He caught the girl by the wrist and forced a kiss upon her. She returned to her cigarette with many a twinge of romantic flutterings.

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"Of course, ten-year-olds *can* be important," she said tactfully. "*You* were important at ten, from what I've heard."

Sasho felt a familiar glow in his head and chest.

"I beat the cockeyed earth out of a rap, all right! There was seven hundred of us. We weren't good enough for the earth!"

Sasho's voice grew bitter as he fell into a well-worn train of thought. That dirty low-down Earth! Jails for folks that grew up on the wrong side of the tracks! Laws for the rich folks to hide behind!

"We didn't have any right to live. They didn't want us in the way, so they locked us up. I was the only kid in the bunch, and I was plenty tough.

"And then this crackpot of a scientist finished up his junk-heap that everybody called the Death Ship, and he needed a crew to ride in it and called for volunteers. Hell, what was a Death Ship to us one way or the other, with some of us up for life, and some for death!

"All the bunk they whipped up about sacrificing our lives for science didn't fool us one bit. None of the officials thought that Death Ship would get anywhere. All they wanted was to save feeding us. Save the trouble of strapping us to the hot plate and jamming on the juice.

"So off we went, and what a laugh! What a helluva laugh! We set down on this little planet like we was an egg! An egg!"

The comparison pleased Sasho. He paced around his throne room, rattling with boastful chuckles.

"That Death Ship was an egg, all right. But the damned scientist that laid it never got to cackle. The earth never found out. We've slipped back there enough times—and they *still* don't know. But *we've* done plenty of cackling, by Jupiter!"

Sasho poured himself a drink and grew expansive with the memory of conquests. He'd fought his full share of every battle, even though he was just a kid. And the way they'd slaughtered Venusian men and converted Venusian women was a lesson in history all by itself.

The hard-boiled girl shuffled restlessly. Sasho raved on.

"It's amazing how far a neat bit of slaughtering will go." He laughed coarsely. "A neat bit of well-placed devastation—that's how we did it."

The seven hundred criminal exiles had played in luck. The native Venusians had been softened by civilization, and their best men had become tangled in the pudding of soft politics, and their best women had grown bored with the ease of living.

"They had plenty of science too," Sasho gloated, "but they'd forgot all they ever knew about flame guns and explosives. You can figure for yourself what a darb of a setup that was for us seven hundred professional killers!"

The girl twisted her lips sarcastically.

"Do you always cackle in the same key?"

Sasho shot an angry glance over his thick shoulders.

"Go ahead. Don't mind me," said the girl, reaching for another cigarette.

"So you want me to shut up, do you?" The chains in Sasho's voice clanged harshly.

"I didn't mean anything. Go on and finish—" she protested.

"So you're getting tired of me!" Sasho snarled.

"No. No, I didn't say that!" the girl wailed.

"GET out, you stubborn little devil! I've had enough of you! Get out,

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damn you! Tell those space ship rats you're fed up on the Venus luxuries. Tell them you want to go back to Earth —where you can walk the streets and starve!"

"No! No, your Majesty! I didn't mean—"

Sasho caught her at the throat and blasted his words at her face. He'd show her! He'd send her back to the earth and she'd get hers right along with the rest of the Earth scum! He screamed,

"We'll come down in our gas flamers and scorch your insides out and singe your hair off, and you'll die with your tongue hanging out, and you'll be saying to yourself this is fine, this is just dandy! You'll say old Sasho treated you too decent up on Venus and you couldn't take it. So you got sassy and got sent back to the earth with the dregs of the universe, where you belonged!"

"Forgive me, Sasho! Forgive me, honest—" the girl cried in utter panic.

"Shut up and get out!" Sasho roared.

The circular wall flew upward. The amazed throngs in the big oval room saw the girl sprawl down the rostrum steps. The irate Emperor caught up his whip and cut a stripe across her naked back as she fled across the silver and orange carpet.

Needless to say, this action was greeted with sadistic laughter throughout the oval room. The attendants and officials had long since learned that the Emperor's temper tantrums must be interpreted as sportive jokes on whoever happened to be the goat. Laughter proved that they were on the side of the Emperor. And it was the best tonic for his ego.

"Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury who arrived yesterday—"

"Give me a rest!" Sasho bawled harshly, still looking after the girl. "What's Mercury to me?"

"But you spoke of making arrangements before launching the big plan—"

"Hell, the plan don't launch till September, Earth time. That's most of four months off. Keep him on tap. I'll get around to him."

CHAPTER IV

"Peace"—Dictator Style

DAY after day Lester Allison was conducted from his lodging place to the capital. Day after day he boiled with inward resentment. He felt like taking a knockout punch at everyone who came near him.

Everyone hated the earth. The hatred was almost a religion with these people. It was the very backbone of the gigantic destructive plan everyone was glowing about.

Lester Allison didn't hate the earth. He began to realize for the first time what it meant to him. He thought constantly of June and the other eight comrades he had left in Mercury. They had thrilled to the thought of starting a fresh new civilization. But what a sick bunch they would be if they knew the awful fate that was being planned for the earth.

"Destruction is the Way to Power." Allison read the words daily on the capital arch. That, indeed, was the core of the Sasho philosophy. Four months of waiting and observing were convincing proof.

Little by little Allison began to grasp what had happened here. From what he had picked up on the S-20, at the lodging house, and from every contact in the capital as he was passed along from one official to another, he began to piece together the story.

It was the story of brutal conquest by a few men—criminals who had ar-

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rived here from the earth forty years ago and set about to kill everybody they couldn't convert to their cause. And their cause was the destruction of anything and everyone that stood between them and the wealth and power they coveted. Ultimately they would take their vengeance out on the entire planet.

Forty years of this had transformed the once-peaceful Venusians into a brutalized, degraded people. Originally this nucleus of American criminals had established themselves as the Cutthroat Colony. But their young leader, who grew up from childhood in their ranks to become the personification of their evil doings, changed the name to the Sasho Empire and gave its seven hundred Cutthroats all the class and swagger of a rich pirate crew.

Allison was not long in learning to tell who were the native Venusians. They were the ones with the greenish-gray pigment, the stubbiest hands, the flattest noses. But there were many half-castes. Most of the capital crowd were these, as were the warriors he had seen aboard the S-20.

Allison was not surprised to learn that the seven hundred Cutthroats had had large families from Venusian wives. This had been an important strategy in the expansion of the colony. Now the conquered cities abounded with children and grandchildren traceable to Cutthroat paternity.

"The rebels against the Sasho Empire have been reduced to a negligible quantity," the secretary of the diplomatic service explained to Allison as they waited for the interview with Sasho.

Most of the rebellious Venusians had fled to the Jagged Mountains, and were harmless; but Sasho still enjoyed searching them out and torturing them, which of course was good fun for everybody, the secretary said.

Allison nodded. He was beginning to understand. Cruelty and brutality and killing were things to be enjoyed, according to the Sasho way of thinking.

"But what happened to the seven hundred Cutthroats?" Allison asked.

The secretary explained that many had died in the past forty years, but those who were left were busy enjoying the fruits of their conquests.

"They're all right here in the capital building. Want to see them?"

THE secretary led the way to a large hall in the basement floor. The door was marked:

CUTTHROAT CONGRESS
ALWAYS IN SESSION
ENTER AT YOUR RISK

It was a foul-smelling place and Allison did not stay long. But he caught a glimpse of the dozens of old men, many of them sumptuously dressed, busy at poker games and bars and shooting contests or other less palatable diversions.

"They're not the sure shots they used to be," said the secretary, "but they still have their fun. Sasho sends them all the green-faced rebels that are caught in the Jagged Mountains. They take care of them, gangster-style, and the treasury furnishes them all the ammunition they need."

At that moment the loudspeaker boomed a call for the ambassador from Mercury to report at the throne. The secretary ushered Allison up to the oval room in a hurry.

"Better give the Emperor what he wants," were the secretary's parting words of advice.

Allison marched across the room to the throne. In the excitement of the

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moment, he forgot to stop and bow. The whip cracked him on the bare arm and blood gathered on his triceps. The mocking laughter died away and he heard Sasho's grating voice.

"Come up, my friend. Don't mind my little joke. I like to whip first and explain afterwards."

Allison mounted the steps slowly, meeting Sasho's hard narrow eyes. He mounted with fists and teeth clenched. A square slap at that ugly face would be an appropriate little joke of his own.

Allison restrained himself. Those flashes of light from Sasho's jeweled fingers somehow reminded him that here was *power*—power built out of the glory of murder and robbery—power that could reach out to the earth or to Mercury—

"All right, open up!" Sasho growled, and the chains in his voice were tight. "I'm in no mood to ask questions. Sit down there and cut loose. I want to know what you've got down in Mercury. And don't skip nothing!"

"We've got plenty!" Allison retorted.

He took the seat at the side of the black marble desk and began. Disregarding the growing jealousy in Sasho's eyes, he unleashed his imagination. He built up a dictator who was a man of steel. He constructed a kingdom in the bowels of Mercury that would have turned any military power in the universe green with envy.

Sasho's breathing became heavy. He glanced around the oval room to the desks, from which important staff members were watching this conference with keen interest. Sasho touched a button and the circular walls descended. He fingered an orange cigarette, without lighting it, crumpled it in his hand.

"Your dictator will be branching out to other planets," he prodded.

Allison shook his head. "Positively not. He's a radical on that point. No outside aggressions. An unbreakable defense against invaders."

Sasho grew easier. "Him and I should team up."

Allison had no ready reply. His bluff had carried him into deep water and he had a feeling there were shoals ahead.

"Well, what about it?" Sasho snarled. "Are you big enough to fix it?"

"What's the point in teaming up?" said Allison. "The Sasho Empire seems to be doing all right as it is."

SASHO got up and walked twice around his desk, picked up a telephone and barked an order. A moment later an attendant entered the throne room, deposited a tray, and went out. On the tray were scraps of red and black metals that had been brought back from Mercury.

"I hear this stuff is cheap where you come from."

Allison didn't answer.

"We've had our scientists chawing on it since the hour you got here. They say the Sasho Empire ought to have some metal with the stand-up that this has got. We could use it in our business. We could use oodles and gobs and shiploads of it."

Sweat was breaking out on Allison's face. "The raw ore is pretty heavy stuff to cart around in space ships."

"That's what I figured," Sasho agreed. "All right. We could come down to Mercury and set up a little ore mill or two. Just give us an out-of-the-way corner. Your dictator couldn't kick on that. Him and I would be pals."

Allison was on thin ice. "What does Mercury get out of it?"

"Protection."

"We don't need it. As I explained, we're well fixed to take care of ourselves," Allison bluffed.

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"Maybe." Sasho's eyes took on a happy murderous gleam. He lit a cigarette. "Did you ever stop to figure out this solar system is getting closer together, with space ships improving right along? The universe is getting closer together, and it's getting more dangerous. *Ain't it?"*

"Perhaps," Allison admitted.

"And it's gonna get a helluva lot more dangerous." Sasho sat down to look at Allison squarely. "See here, I want to know something about you and I want it straight. Are you in a position to bind your dictator to an agreement?"

Allison pressed at the back of his chair to keep from squirming. "As I told you," he said coolly, "my dictator doesn't like making outside agreements."

"What he likes ain't the point!" Sasho growled. "You're his ambassador. What I want to know is whether you've got the power to bind him to an alliance. Have you or ain't you?"

Allison saw that he was between the devil and the deep sea, with the devil crowding him dangerously. If he should say that he had the authority to make alliances, Sasho would hound him —perhaps torture him—into making one.

But if Allison should say that he didn't have the authority, Sasho would send another expedition straight back to Mercury to get someone who could make commitments. And then the whole bluff would burst and Mercury would be lost. And Allison's comrades and his dream of life and June—

"I have the authority," said Allison in measured words, "to make—*or refuse to make*—alliances."

"All right. We'll draw up an alliance," Sash snapped.

"The hell we will!" Allison exploded, coming to his feet.

Impulsively he seized a chunk of red metal off the tray, swung it in his fist defiantly.

"I was kidnaped and thrown aboard your space ship, I was brought to Venus in handcuffs, I was whipped as I came up to this throne. Do you think I'm in any mood to grant favors?"

ALLISON slammed the metal down on the black marble table savagely and the chips of marble flew.

Sasho's hand fell on his black bull whip. He sized Allison up and down. He sneered and gave a low inarticulate growl. He released the whip and touched a button.

The walls rose, the big oval room again surrounded them. With a toss of his head Sasho signalled to someone among the throng.

A moment later six brightly uniformed, hard-faced officers bowed over the rug, marched up to the throne, stood at stiff attention.

"Our ambassador from Mercury is not in the mood to make agreements today," said Sasho, oiling the rusty chains of his voice with mockery. "Take him with you on your flame-cloud jaunt —and see that he comes back all cheered up."

Almost before Allison had time to catch his breath, he found himself aboard the S-37, plunging through the skies straight for the earth.

CHAPTER V

Ironic Doom

THE S-37 was well loaded with Sasho's men—six dashing officers, several venerable old Cutthroats, and a number of bright-eyed young novices at the arts of murder and destruction, being rewarded for their progress by this gala excursion.

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The eyes of young and old alike drilled Allison with a hungry, murderous gleam. To them he was a prize cake that they were forbidden to slice.

And how they would have loved to slice him! But he had to be returned whole to Sasho.

At first Allison had only the vaguest conception of what might happen to him before his return. The talk was hazy, ominous. He was in for something juicy, they hinted. He'd be transformed, he'd be purged of his conceit, he'd come back a piece of putty in Sasho's hands. And he'd go back to his Mercurian dictator and the militant millions with a nice little heartrending story that would win them over to Sasho.

Look how the Mars ambassadors had softened up—two of them had come through beautifully. The third one had got a chill in his belly and gone suicide on them. But what the devil, two scared emissaries had been enough to pull the Mars rulers into line. Yes, you're damned right, old Sasho's got technique!

Allison got a clear notion of what was coming only when one of the officers produced some newspaper clippings.

The black headlines were all over the front page. Officers and passengers gathered around while one of their number read the story with ribald glee. The paper had been picked up in America immediately after the first gas-flamer excursion of four months ago.

Through the bombastic uproar of the listeners, Allison caught the gist of the story:

METEOROID BLAZES PATH OF DEATH! . . .

Oct. 10 (Nationwide News).—Horrible death descended almost instantaneously upon hundred of thousands of persons today, when a swift visitor from the skies believed to be a gas-bearing meteoroid shot across three central states, accompanied by an explosion of unparalleled dimensions.

Cities and rural districts through a one-hundred-mile strip are tonight a vast mass of flames. Upwards of a million people have been made homeless. Aid is being rushed to uncounted numbers of injured, said to be in a state of living death as a result of burns and severe shock.

The nation's entire Red Cross and Army emergency resources are on their way to relieve the vast suffering.

Witnesses to the disaster vary in their accounts of the descent of the meteoroid. Some claim to have glimpsed a dark streak that raced across the sky from horizon to horizon. There is general agreement that a long bluish cloud boiled downward toward the earth's surface during the fifteen or twenty seconds before the terrific explosion burst.*

Astronomers are digging through records of centuries past, trying in vain to find a parallel for this rare stellar phenomenon.

The fires raging tonight can be seen from seven different states, glowing high into the heavens. Communication lines are practically nonexisent. A survey made by Nationwide News disclosed an unbelievable toll in human misery and farm and property damage, with bridges, state highways and telephone and telegraph lines literally wiped out.

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* This explosive gas is undoubtedly a powerfully concentrated refinement of gaseous, volatile compounds such as have reportedly been used in World War II. When the Nazis took the Belgian Fort Eban Emael in May, 1940, it is said that they used a super-powerful flame-throwing device, shooting highly combustile liquids or gases, which disintegrated concrete and melted the heavy siege guns.

At any rate, whatever method the Nazis employed, it seems certain that in future wars, gas will be used more to destroy enemy forts, gun emplacements and trenches than to burn out men's lungs, as in World War I.

There is little doubt that chemical warfare has far from reached its zenith of destruction. Nowadays, an invading army proceeds so rapidly with mechanized strides that the use of such gases as phosgene or mustard, to blind, cripple and asphyxiate enemy troops, is not only time-destroying but unnecessary.

But in the future, newer and far more deadlier gases will be found, which may even take the place of heavy armaments, at best expensive to manufacture and troublesome to service with gasoline and oil.—Ed.

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THE officer who had produced the newspaper clippings pasted them on the wall of the cabin, so that everyone could have the savage satisfaction that the black headlines afforded.

"'Probable Act of God!'" the officer grinned, reading further. "What a wallop Sasho got out of that when I showed it to him."

There was more uproarious laughter, and someone wondered what kind of gag the earth newspapers would think up after *this* visitation. And what would they say when *another* excursion —the S-44—came within six hours after this one? And what would they say a few days later when Sasho turned loose his *whole fleet?*

"They'll think the end of the world has come!" someone roared.

"Which it sure has, for them!" another agreed.

There was one female aboard the S-37, a fluffy-haired girl who once might have been attractive. Allison learned that she had angered the Emperor by a trifling remark. Now she was being sent back to the earth.

The girl went from corner to corner of the cabin in tears of rage, and the officers followed her about, making no end of sport at her expense. They made her believe they'd been ordered to kill her. She fought when anyone came near her, and cried and cursed—

Plop! An officer pasted a handful of tape over her mouth. *Zip!* Another officer roped her, and tied her hands and feet, and they tossed her onto a bench. She struggled helplessly.

There was more talk of how best to murder the girl, and more roughhouse and horseplay. They grabbed her up and tossed her back and forth like a basketball, and bounced her against the wall—and then told her to cool off and take it easy and stop her blubbering.

Suddenly the pilot's voice came through the speakers, reminding them that they were well into the earth's gravitational sphere. The horseplay stopped. The officers unbound the girl, made her get into a space suit and helmet and parachute harness.

"Sasho's orders," said an officer. "Sorry to say, we don't get to kill you."

The officer explained that the girl had plenty of oxygen for a long fall—and she'd have a long fall! When she descended deep enough into the earth's atmosphere, the space parachute would open automatically.

The girl's send-off was a final volley of ridicule. They hoped she landed in mid-ocean or in a desert or in the top of a tall tree. She fought to the last, still deceived into thinking that she would fall to her death. The officers knew better. She would land somewhere in mid-North America, as Sasho had commanded.

She fell through the lock-equipped disposal chute, and that was the last that Allison or any of the others ever saw of her.

The officers turned their talents now to Allison. They removed his handcuffs, asked him what he was sore about, threatened to beat him to death. He knew it was simply a threat; they knew he knew, and it angered them. They felt an urge toward a fist fight. They cleared the center of the room and forced him into a brawl.

The first two officers went sprawling. Allison's arms concealed a surprising wallop. He had grown up on a farm and had developed a lot of hard-hitting energy. But the remaining four officers pounced in on him, and soon he went down under a battery of clubbing.

"We're s'posed to cheer him up, boys!" they taunted, laying on with blows. "Cheer him up for Sasho! Come on, you lads!"

The younger generation of passen-

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gers piled in. Now and then one fell back, cooled by a near knockout. But Allison knew the best he could hope to do was to keep his face from being smashed to a pulp. He played defensive. Had he done more, his clubbers would have resorted to their weapons.

AGAIN the pilot's amplified voice interrupted the cruel roughhouse.

"We are approaching the earth. Time to get set for action!"

Order was restored on the spot. The officers straightened their uniforms, donned fresh orange sashes, manned their posts. The passengers crowded the rear windows. The big moment they had come to watch was drawing near. Everyone was tense. Eyes were alight with the glitter of cruelty.

Allison, again in handcuffs, smeared his bleeding face against his shoulder and tried to shake out of his grogginess. Things happened fast now. It was all he could do to catch the drift.

He heard the radio-telephone communication with the S-44, whose excursion would follow close on the heels of the S-37.

"Strike anywhere," the S-37 officials advised the other ship. "The American continent is big. Besides, we're six hours ahead of you. We'll be out of your way."

S-44 inquired where the S-37 would strike.

"We'll lay a strip along the Atlantic seaboard," the S-37 replied.

There was the daylight factor to be considered, and it was now morning along the Eastern coast. The S-44, following through six hours later, could cut a swath through the interior.

"We'll be a little slow getting back to Venus," said the S-37, "because we've got the ambassador from Mercury aboard. But we'll bring him to time, and then Sasho may as well give the whole fleet the go-ahead signal."

If these trial flights were as successful as expected, there would be nothing to stand in the way of Sasho's complete devastating revenge upon the earth—unless there should be dangerous planetary neighbors, such as the militant millions of Mercury, who couldn't be brought into line. "But you know Sasho!" an officer chuckled grimly. "He never leaves anything to chance!"

The eager excited radio-telephone conversation ended abruptly. The time had come for action. A slight cushioning of the ship's flight forewarned the entrance into the thin edges of the earth's atmosphere.

Snap! Zmmmmmmmm!

Allison knew that one. It was the motors of the tempo-system that combatted friction heat as the ship plunged from the void into air.

Snap! The usual heavy roar of the rocket motors went silent. Allison wasn't sure why, but for some reason the ship was to coast through a tangent to the earth's surface with no rockets firing.

They plunged on purely from momentum. The curve of the earth flattened out into a horizon. Distant cities rolled into view.

Snap! That one had Allison guessing. The pilot's hand drew back from the blue-knobbed lever, his eyes swinging to the mirror that looked through the rear of the ship. Every face, turned toward the rear of the ship, was tense with excitement.

Then Allison saw. Some unseen exhaust under the tail of the ship shot a stream of thin blue smoke—or was it gas?—down at the earth. Dangerous-looking stuff it was, almost transparent in the sunlight. It thickened as it sifted downward. The sight of it seemed to give everyone a thrill.

On and on it poured, flowing back in

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an endless stream, a billion times more luminous than the trail of a sky-writing airplane. It strung out into a hundred-mile rope of seething blue cloud, lost over the rear horizon.

NOW the S-37 skimmed close to the ground, coasting against the stubborn forces of gravity and air resistance. Those manufacturing towns passing beneath were scarcely a quarter of a mile down.

The ship's momentum was almost spent. Allison flinched. At this rate they would crash into the approaching mountain range. Then—

Snap! Brrrwowrmmmmmm!

The rocket motors zoomed, the very earth leaped back. Out of its downward trajectory the ship shot. Cities, rivers and mountain range blurred into the distance. But the long cloud of gas—

The blaze of the explosion filled the whole rear vista. The onlookers threw their hands in front of their eyes. The flare pierced Allison's eyes like white-hot needles. It was as if the sun had splashed fire over the surface of the earth!

"Perfect!" an officer shouted.

Yes, the rocket fire had ignited the tail of the gas cloud! To Allison's horror, the explosion spread in a great fan-shaped inferno. The rocket ship itself was perfectly safe, of course, having leaped out of danger at the initial rocket explosion.

The pilot swerved the ship through a swift arc so that the passengers could look back and catch sight of the vast river of fire. It flooded over the horizon like a flying comet, eating the blue cloud as it went.

"Perfect! Perfect!" everyone shouted, and the ship was in an uproar of jubilation.

"How does the Honorable Allie like *that!*" the officers taunted.

As the ship circled back, the long line of black smoke and yellow blaze expanded into a grim picture. At a safe distance, the S-37 wove to and fro to review the extent of the artificial cataclysm. Sickening realization came upon Allison. Those heavier spots where smoke and blaze were the thickest were cities—homes and factories and automobiles and human beings, going up in flames!

"Another feather in Sasho's hat!" one of the youngesters cried. That was typical of the outlaws' hilarious spirit of achievement. With their inbred love of cruelty, the servants of Sasho boasted in glowing terms of wider applications of this method of attack. They visualized the glorious Sasho revenge that was near at hand. When Sasho loosed his whole fleet upon the earth in attacks like these, no known force could stop them.

Allison, listening to these hideous forecasts, knew that they were no exaggeration. The earth was helpless. Mars, according to what he had learned, had been talked into a defenseless position. And certainly Mercury, with a population of ten Earth folk, could offer no threat.

And yet it was the possibility of resistance from the imagined millions of Mercury that remained a thorn in Sasho's flesh.

The officers on the S-37 grew more confident every minute that they were gaining ground with Allison. The alliance was in the bag, they told each other. And in boastful tones within Allison's hearing, they considered what a simple matter it would be for their ships to spin down to Mercury's underground world, fill the caverns with explosive gas, and touch off a rocket. Very simple! One quick blast and the militant denizens of Mercury would

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cease to worry anybody!

THE alliance was in the bag, all right. But just to make sure, the Honorable Allie must see more.

Moreover, the servants of Sasho had well-whetted appetites to view their achievements in detail.

The space ship eased down toward a burning city. Thin streams of people who had miraculously escaped death from the initial explosions raced in all directions, frantic to save themselves or others from spreading flames and collapsing walls.

The pilot of the S-37 sought out a perfect landing place, hidden from the turmoil—a long valley-like rock quarry at the city's edge. It was cluttered with stones and hoists and narrow-gauge tracks, but it was satisfactorily secluded. Sasho's crusaders preferred not to be seen.

"Keep your eyes wide open, Honorable Allie!"

Allison didn't need the command. His sharp eyes missed nothing. He steeled himself to the prospect of going forth to view the horrible shambles.

"Leave the airlocks open as long as smoke doesn't blow this way," an officer barked to the three or four men who were to stand guard.

Already the oxygen pumps were at work to bring the supply back to capacity. Unmasked and unencumbered by space suit units, the party marched forth.

The roar and crackle of flames, the stench of burning buildings and bodies leaped out to meet them. The invaders picked their paths warily.

They were undaunted by the screaming and screeching. Rather they were elated over it. This excitement was the emotion they lived for, and they drank it in to the full.

"Look at those dead bodies, Allie! Nicely blackened, don't you think?"

Involuntarily Allison jerked back in revulsion. The two guards to whom he was handcuffed allowed him to stop. Here was what they wanted.

In front of Allison was a small boy, sobbing his heart out. He had just crept out from under his overturned tin wagon. Miraculously it had spared him from death.

The boy was crying for his mother. Obviously she was the woman lying in front of him, clutching the handle of the wagon. But he didn't recognize her. And little wonder, for she was simply a mass of blackened, scorched flesh, her hair and eyebrows and clothes completely burned away.

The boy's eyes turned to a scrawny dying little animal that had been a kitten. He looked at it in horrified bewilderment. Its fur was gone, it was mewing pitifully. He couldn't understand what or why—

"Move back!" Allison's guards jerked at his wrists. The party edged back to safety. A wall was about to give way—

"*But the boy!*" Allison cried, tears of rage in his eyes.

The Sasho party laughed like demons out of hell.

"The boy!" an officer jeered. "He's an *Earth* boy, ain't he?"

The burning wall bulged and crashed, the boy and his kitten were buried alive under the fiery heap.

FOR the next five hours and more the party plodded among the fast-growing ruins, feeding emotionally upon this holocaust, its horror forever graven upon Allison's mind. Allison saw it all, but the picture that sank into his brain most deeply was the satanic gleam of the perpetrators' greenish faces, lighted by the leaping mountains of red flame.

Then the fates blew a mischievous

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breath that descended upon every member of the party. It happened as the group wended its way back toward the deserted quarry that held their space ship.

Across the sky it came. They did not hear it. Before the sound could reach them, the thing would strike death.

To their eyes, it was simply a slim black streak shooting in a horizontal line a half mile or so above their heads. In its wake was a widening tail of blue cloud that spread and boiled downward.

"The S-44! It was to follow us in six hours. God, we've stayed here too long!"

"Run for the ship!"

"We can't make it!"

The swiftest runner in the world couldn't have escaped.

CHAPTER VI

Lonely Vigil

THE gloom that had descended into the rocky-red caverns of Mercury might have hung on endlessly, had it not been for June O'Neil's resilience. She came back at the tragic facts with almost superhuman courage.

They made her the leader. That was Smitt's and Mary's strategy. The responsibility was a stimulant, and June O'Neil assumed it with such a zeal that her eight followers would have been ashamed to admit their fears.

The first point upon which June insisted was that the postponed weddings must go through at once. No matter if it couldn't be a five-couple wedding. Her loss must not stand in the way of their personal happiness.

Not long after she had administered the marriage vows, June called the four young couples together.

"Our robot ship is dead," she said, her eyes turned toward the space ship runway. "But Lester isn't dead. I can't believe that they have killed him. They could have killed him here if they had wanted to."

All this had been talked over many times before. The conclusion had always been the same; Allison was a captive in some capital on Venus; but for what purpose, no one could say. Many hours equivalent to several Earth days had passed, but no hints of further attacks from the Venusian pirates—if pirates they were—had come.

June looked at her circle of comrades with steady eyes. "Can we build a ship that will get to Venus?"

The eyes turned toward the young boyish-faced Laughlin, who responded by drawing a bundle of diagrams from his pocket. The other men looked on proudly. Reams and reams of paper had been sketched upon during these recent days. June O'Neil's vision had been anticipated.

THEY ALL worked. The automatic Mercurian machines were cunning, the metals were marvelously responsive. Laughlin, in charge of the construction, was kept rushed to supply everyone with jobs they could do.

But Laughlin had a notion up his sleeve: It would be almost as easy to turn out every part in duplicate. Two space boats could be made almost as easily as one. The work went forward.

June stayed with the work almost beyond her strength. When it was time to rest and the others slept, she could not sleep. She would slip away from the laboratory living quarters, carrying her little three-stringed zither that Allison had once made for her, to play simple little tunes that brought her solace.

Always at such times she would watch the space ship runway, hoping—

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waiting—praying—

Out of the electrically lighted laboratories and into the torchlighted runways, two red metal hulls were rolled one day that looked like massive streamlined bullets.

One of the ships was done! It was ready for a tryout. The other was almost completed. Their makers breathed with pride.

Those reams of designs had done something startling. Not so large as the robot ship, much smaller than the silvery-nosed pirate ship from Venus, these two boats were built for speed and solidity.

Laughlin believed that they were unlike any models ever seen before. The fine metals in their solid noses, together with their high speed, should provide them with a punch and a resistance to bullets that was almost beyond calculation.

AN Earth-made tungsten pile-driver, Laughlin said, would have been cotton in comparison.

Smitt gave the two ships the name of *battering rams*. Turn him loose with one of these boats, he said, was all he'd ask. He'd batter those pirates into pancake batter.

One mishap occurred on the trial flight of the first ship; it happened before the ship got out of the runway. It was gliding along the pathway when Smitt inadvertently snapped on the rocket motor.

Instantly he snapped it off—but in that moment the boat leaped, struck into the rocky wall obliquely, gouged out a thirty-foot cavern of living stone, and came to a stop with its nose buried. Smitt stepped forth with one eye black and the other gleaming with enthusiasm. If that wall had only been pirates!

They excavated carefully, and the powerful hull emerged undented! A battering ram it was, indeed!* Its makers were confident that whatever adventures the rescue of Allison might entail their two boats would prove skyworthy.

The test flights of both battering rams were successful, the tryouts being made within the space of four or five hours. Each of the men tried his hand at piloting. The radio-telephones were found satisfactory for keeping the two ships in touch during flight.

Last-minute preparations were made. As June O'Neil had insisted, all of them should go. They would lock the laboratories and camouflage the entrances, so that if there should be visitors they would find nothing.

June's plan was adopted only after much discussion. It would be a dangerous adventure at best, and the men felt that their brides might be safer to stay. Then they recalled the silvery-nosed S-20 and the arrogant, orange-sashed Venusian crew, and thought otherwise. Whatever the cost, they must hold their remaining group together. Even if they should lose their foothold in Mercury to chance invaders . . .

But June O'Neil did not decide for herself as easily as for the others. Secretly she planned to stay—*by herself!*

In the final hours of sleep before the

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*The Mercurian workshops originally developed by Jason Kilhide, the renegade Earthman whom Lester Allison had vanquished, were a marvel of mechanical ingenuity. Helping not a little was the excellence of Mercurian ores, the most plastic and yet the most durable ever mined.

Because of this fine mahinery and the excellent ores, the young men whom Allison had left on Mercury were able to construct fighter space ships whose hulls were so durable, any other space vessel could be penetrated like a hot knife cutting butter.

While metallurgists have been experimenting for years to make metals lighter and more durable, it is entirely possible that metals on other planets may be entirely different from any ores yet known. —Ed.

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momentous take-off, June acted upon her rash decision. She left this note:

Lester might come while you are gone. I believe he would want me to stay here to keep watch over our stronghold. That is what I have decided to do. It is my choice to stay alone, and my wish that the rest of you go as you have planned to do.

When you read this note, you may want to find me, hoping to persuade me to change my mind. You mustn't. I shall hide where you can't find me, so please don't delay. I know that you will come back. I pray that you may bring Lester.

—June.

June stole forth, carrying with her the little zither Lester Allison had made for her. In the lonely hours to come, music would be a solace. She departed from the well-beaten paths, she left the torchlights and murmuring rivulets and adventured back into the endless depths, where the caverns were dark and silent.

The silence and the darkness were a little terrifying. She suddenly felt the loss of Lester Allison more than ever before. She listened for the distant roar of the space boats taking off. But she could hear nothing—nothing but the little hollow echoes of her own breathing or the slight touch of her arm against the strings of her zither.

Suppose something dreadful befell her companions! Suppose they should never come back!

All at once the awfulness of being left here alone *indefinitely* bore down upon the girl. How many stories she had heard of persons going insane from the unbearable lonesomeness, the horror of being trapped in empty caverns! Suppose Lester should not come back for years. Suppose—

NEVER before had June listened to inner voices or taken stock in hunches. With a strong flare for common sense, she discredited such things as silly superstitions. But now—

"Today I'm riding toward Death, June. I'm riding toward flames of Death . . ."

Again and again it came—Lester's words, his voice. No, it was all in her mind! It was Fear. Fear was melting her strong resolve. Fear!

She clambered over the dark rocks swiftly. Dim glints of light were in the distance. She would go back. She would still catch them before they took off. She must hurry. If she had only brought a torch—

Clack! Zinnng! The zither slipped from her hands. An instant's hesitation—one of those instants which can turn the fates of lives—

She groped to pick it up, lost her footing. Zither and girl fell together into an unseen pitfall that might have been made to order for a medieval dungeon. But June O'Neil had no thought of that. She was unconscious.

CHAPTER VII

Conqueror's Boast

SMITT and Mary stood at the entrances of one of the battering rams, reading June O'Neil's note for the third time. If it had been a bomb, it would have shocked no more.

As for the others, Redman and his wife came, bristling with enthusiasm for the take-off; they stopped, read the note, stood speechless. Then from the other ship came the other two couples, Laughlin and his wife, and Bob and Betty Wakefield.

The ships did not start on schedule. Smitt and Mary invented excuses for an hour's delay. No one needed to comment on June's rash action. All of them knew that her heartbreak was too much for one person to endure. Still,

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it seemed dreadful to leave her.

But everyone of them respected June O'Neil. And if this was the way she wanted it, then they would comply. A last lingering look down the avenues of torches was fruitless. Motors had been roaring gently for several minutes. If June O'Neil had thought better of her decision, she surely would have appeared before this.

The two red battering rams crawled up through the long runway and charged out into space.

For a time the foursome in each boat were quiet and thoughtful. Venus seemed far away as it shone through the inky sky. The adventure ahead of them was nothing if not uncertain.

As the hours rolled on, they enlivened their journey by radioing back and forth. Smitt and Mary were at one radio-telephone; Bob and Betty Wakefield at the other. It became a game to switch wavelengths on each other and find each other again—a sort of radio hide-and-seek.

This game was still going strong when a strange voice leaked in.

"This is the S-44 returning. S-44 returning. Do you hear us, headquarters? This is the S-44 returning . . . S-44 . . . S-44 . . ."

Bob Wakefield's slight *hisst!* cut the battering ram conversation off abruptly. Smitt and Mary held their tongues. It had been agreed in advance that all official radioing to outsiders was to be done by Smitt. But this seemed a good time for silence.

For most of an hour both ships listened. The S-44, whatever it might be, continued to announce its progress, at intervals, without response from any headquarters.

Reception grew clearer. The bluish white ball that was Venus puffed out like an expanding balloon. Mary kept her eyes on the heavens. Out across the blackness she had watched the other battering ram, flying parallel with them since their departure from Mercury. Less than a mile away, keeping an even speed, it blazed like a tiny red bullet against the ubiquitous black velvet of the void.

Smitt stuck to the radio-telephone. Suddenly business picked up. An answering voice responded to the S-44 calls. Conversation took on a bewildering speed.

"Come in, S-44. What's the news?"

"Everything's okay. We cut a hundred-mile strip inland from the East Coast."

"Good. Hold on. I'll relay that to Sasho."

A short silence followed; then the headquarters voice resumed.

"What about the other ship?"

"Haven't they reported?"

"Not yet."

"Give them time. They said they'd be late getting back."

"When did you last communicate?" the headquarters voice asked.

"Six hours before we struck," said the S-44. "They were ready to lay a flame-cloud *down* the seaboard at the time, and—"

"HOLD on. Another call from Sasho." Half a minute or so elapsed. Then—"Sasho's all primed for action. He's ready to turn the whole fleet loose as soon as the other ship reports. You didn't happen to see their flames?"

"Hell, no, we cut down through a blanket of heavy weather. Not much chance anyway, the way we had split up the territory. We shot west. They had headed south."

"Okay, just so you both came through all right. The fleet's fixed up with a layout that will prevent any cross-ups."

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"They'll have a fireman's picnic. Tell them we'll be down on their tails as soon as we can load up some more gas."

"They haven't gone yet. Sasho's still waiting on that Mercury deal."

Mercury deal!

Smitt blew a bomb of breath square into the transmitter. Luckily he had thrown the switch several minutes before. The mention of Mercury caught him gasping.

What was this all about? Cutting strips along the East Coast! Flame-clouds! Sasho! Gas! Turning the fleet loose! A fireman's picnic. And now—*that Mercury deal!*

"Hell, tell him to go ahead," the S-44 voice resumed. "The other ship's got that deal cinched by this time."

"That's what Sasho's waiting to hear. He's in a stew about it. Waiting for another round with that Allison fellow. He's getting the jitters. Says he smells trouble on that Mercury deal."

Smitt and his companions held their breaths. What a break! They'd blundered squarely onto a hot trail! Allison was alive! Alive and obviously much in demand!

"What do you want *me* to do about it?" the voice from S-44 drawled. "Head back for Earth and pick Allison up?"

On the instant Smitt took a long chance, snapped on his transmitter, barked,

"Where on Earth is he?"

Neither voice answered. There was something ominous about the silence. Smitt repeated his demand.

"Where is Lester Allison?"

Quick as a flash the headquarters voice snapped,

"Who said that?"

"I don't know," said S-44.

"Who called for Allison?"

"I did!" Smitt snapped back. "Where is he?"

"Who are you?" The headquarters voice sharpened to an urgent tone. *"Who's calling Allison?"*

Smitt snapped his transmitter switch off with a jerk. He had impulsively spoken out of turn and he knew it.

Into his receiver came a persistent clamor to know who he was and where he was calling from, and what business of his it was that Allison was wanted on Venus. The tones were threatening.

"Don't answer them!" Mary gasped; but instinctively she knew that the damage had been done.

There were minutes of silent panic in both battering rams. They seemed to be driving into something ominous. What was the unseen trouble back of those hostile voices?

Smitt shifted wavelengths and soon Bob Wakefield on the other battering ram found him.

"Bob Wakefield—"

"Okay, Smitt."

"Did you hear that talk that about Allison?"

"Yes."

"What did you make of it?"

"He's on the earth instead of Venus."

"Right. We're on the wrong track. Tell Laughlin we're changing our course this minute."

MARY saw the heavens swerve gently. The huge bluish-white mass of Venus passed off the nose of the ship and far out to the side.

Simultaneously the other battering ram turned. Had there been a traffic cop out in that realm of space, he would have seen the two sleek red bullets with their tails of fire cut parallel curves around him. Again they were off on straight unwavering lines. The tiny bright dot of the Earth was now their goal.

Smitt hastily returned to the S-44 wavelength. The mysterious talk between the returning ship and its Venu-

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sian headquarters, though intermittent and sketchy for the next hour, was tense with gathering excitement.

Headquarters were much disturbed. Emperor Sasho was reported to be on a rampage and the whole Empire was holding its breath. Sasho was scheduled to broadcast an important pronouncement within another hour. It was believed that he would give the go-ahead signal to his fleet. And within a few days the Victory Festival would follow.

But strangely that certain ship hadn't returned. There was the rub. It was problematical whether Sasho would risk going ahead. After all his intricate plans for the timing and spacing of his attacks, and after all his glorious boasts to his Empire that the moment of luscious revenge was at hand, here was a slip-up. And from the guarded talk, Smitt gathered that a slip-up was a blowtorch to Emperor Sasho's pride.

But on top of that was the disturbing report that had made the Emperor wild and had set the whole capital in an uproar. Unidentified voices had come in over the radio-telephones—voices that inquired for the ambassador of Mercury! What could this be but approaching ships from the militant millions of Mercury?

Millions? Smitt found this talk wholly bewildering, not knowing of Lester Allison's original bluff.

The minute for the Emperor's pronouncement drew close. The S-44 communications had ended, the S-44 having arrived at the capital port. There were frantic last-minute efforts by headquarters to get another word from the mysterious voice that had inquired for Allison. Needless to say, both battering rams kept their transmitters switched off; but at their receivers, the eight occupants were all ears.

The designated minute arrival. Emperor Sasho was presented with a fanfare. His ugly voice grated through the speakers.

"The hour for the ultimate revenge has come! (Loud cheering.) You of the younger generations know what your forefathers suffered. Today the survivors of that gallant band of heroes sit before me. They have lived to see their powers multiply.

"In these coming hours, they shall see their Empire—your Empire and mine—strike back at that scapegrace of the Solar System—*the earth!* (A tumult of cheering.)

"No revenge was ever so sweet as this. The earth called your forefathers criminals. They *were* criminals! They would have been ashamed to be anything less than criminals *on the earth!* (Cheers!) The earth made them outcasts! The earth spewed them forth as if they were filth!

"But the fortunes of the universe have followed them. They applied their talents to the building of a new civilization—a civilization built on those sturdy principles of might and power and seizure—yes, and slaughter! The gods of destruction have served them well.

"Now they sit before me, these survivors of that original band, waiting to see what you and I will do in this, our greatest hour of opportunity. *What will we do? Will we burn the earth to a cinder?"*

A MOB of infuriated voices clamored,

"Hell-l-l, yes-s-s!"

"I, the youngest of the founders," Sasho's voice went on in a rattling throb, "am proud to be your Emperor! I am proud that you younger generations have taken the great ideals which the smug earth once branded as *criminal* and *cutthroat*—that you have made of

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them a dignified and honorable philosophy of slaughter. *You are the hope of the universe!*

"You have tested equipment at your command—the most efficient machines of devastation ever made. You are ready to go forth and explode life off the face of the earth. At my command you will *clean up the earth!*

"*Did I say the earth?* Let me quickly add—the earth *and her allies!*

"I refer to none other than the *hordes of Mercury!* Let them come! Let them descend upon us by millions if they are able! We'll slaughter them on sight!"

There was a tremendous cheer. The clanking voice resumed in a low ominous tone.

"At this minute, the ships of Mercury are plunging through space to meet us. At this minute, we have good reason to believe, they are hearing my words. The Dictator of Mercury himself may be listening.

"For the sake of the record, let me repeat that my offers of a friendly agreement with Mercury have been refused. My efforts to set up trade relations—Mercury metals for Venus protection—have been scorned. The mischief-making ambassador of Mercury, treated to an excursion to the earth, has not returned.

"Mercury ships, are you listening? For the last time, wherever you are, have you any words for us? Answer me this minute—or you shall take the consequences!"

At their receiver Smitt, Mary and the Redmans looked at each other out of white, nervous faces. Smitt's teeth were set, his lips were tight. The impact of this colossal scheme of destruction beat down upon unsuspecting nerves with a shattering effect.

Fifteen seconds of silence passed. Then Sasho's voice jumped through the receiver in a high, screaming pitch.

"All right for you, Mercury! *Come on! We'll blast you to atoms!* I hereby command the flame-cloud fleet to go into action at once! Carry out the destruction plan to the letter! Whatever resistance crops up out of land or skies, *smash it mercilessly! Go! and the gods of slaughter be with you!*"

On toward the earth the two battering rams sped. The occupants were for the most part speechless. They had set forth simply to find Lester Allison. But the scene had widened. Gradually, as they rode the spaceways, their quiet tension changed from the silence of frightened rabbits to the silence of steel determination.

CHAPTER VIII

Nick of Time

AT the controls of the S-37, Lester Allison sped for Mercury as hard as he could go.

All the way he thanked the fates that had spared his life. It had been almost miraculous, so swiftly had it happened. The picture of that crucial moment still hung before his eyes.

Underneath the gray overcast sky, the blue ropelike death cloud had boiled down fiercely. Allison's party had dropped their cameras, weapons and trophies and bolted for dear life. His two guards had instantly unsnapped the handcuffs to free themselves for the chase.

The dash for the rock quarry where the S-37 had landed had been a futile gesture. The distance had been too great. Death had descended too fast.

But Allison's sharp observations of a few hours before had furnished him a trick. Something beyond that nearby embankment of pink stones had clung in his memory.

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His wrists free, he had leaped for the hidden cut, set into motion the little four-wheeled car at the summit of the narrow-gauge track, shot down the long incline with the speed of a rocket.

The rest had happened almost too fast to be remembered. The four guards left with the ship had been completely befuddled at the sight of their party returning on the dead run. Allison had brushed past two of them, knocked down a third.

The fourth he had *caught*—within the chamber of the airlocks, for the airlocks had automatically closed the instant the flat of his hand had shot out against the throttle, and he had zoomed off into space.

An instant after the shock of take-off, Allison had looked back to see another hideous, fan-shaped inferno sweep across the landscape, its flare reddening the vast blanket of clouds overhead.

His own rocket fire had missed the descending gas, surely by not more than a few yards; but the S-44 many miles inland had touched off the explosion. It was sickening to think what must have happened to the rest of the S-37's "excursion," victims of the medicine they had dealt to others so gleefully.

Allison had at once set his controls for some idle circling on a safe side of the earth, and had taken some minutes for deep breathing. It was hard to realize that he had suddenly been freed of his handcuffs and had fallen into possession of a space ship.

But he knew he was not free in the fuller sense of the word. He was bound to a responsibility. He must warn the earth.

He had thereupon transferred his one passenger, a surly conceited, yellow-eyed guard named Siccola, from the airlocks to a small steel-encased room obviously designed for prison purposes.

Then Allison had gone back to the earth and had spent tense hours warning the governmental leaders of America. That gas-cloud explosion of four months ago, he insisted, and the two recurrences of recent hours, were not astronomical mishaps. They were trial attacks. They were forewarnings of a complete devastation planned by a deadly enemy on Venus.

The governmental leaders had listened open-mouthed. Some had fainted, some had been angered, one had succumbed to a heart attack, many had even laughed. But Allison had driven the message home, and the newspapers, radios, and alert governmental leaders had caught up the alarm to spread it like wildfire over the continents. The civilized world went into a panic.

"We've got to do something!" was the inevitable cry of a defenseless people.

THE earth suddenly realized that it was years behind the times in the development of space ships—and no offhand avalanche of blueprints could make up for the wasted years.

Having done all that he could do in a few hours of time, Allison had sped away toward certain other responsibilities—personal ones that were near to his heart. He had a planet of his own to look after. And a people. And a sweetheart.

Had the Sasho Empire invaded Mercury during his four months' absence? That fear had accumulated in Allison's spine, and knotted his nerves and fatigued him for many days past . . .

The S-37 nosed down into the long dark runway, into the deep chasms of Mercury. Allison's eyes were eager.

There were the torchlights burning as brightly as ever, the red rock walls glowing. There was the red metal

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bridge, the avenues into the distance. But there were no people.

Allison leaped through the opened airlocks, strode out into the light gravity, called at the top of his voice. No one answered.

He hastened to the laboratories. Keys had been left in the usual hiding place. In a shop he found the robot ship—thoroughly dissected! He found designs—reams of them, waste-baskets full; and on the shop walls was the final supreme design worked out in all its intricate details. One by one the items of that final plan had been checked off; and all around the shop were the evidences of building.

So they had built a ship and gone! But where?

Perhaps to Venus to find him? Perhaps to the earth from fear of more invaders?

Allison was suddenly tired. His prisoner aboard the S-37 had been cared for and was securely locked up. A host of worries flickered out of Allison's mind and he slept.

He awoke hours later, made hasty preparations to take off. The disappointment of finding no one here at the home base hung like a shadow over his thoughts. He supposed he would go to Venus. Strange, he thought, that June hadn't even left a message for him.

A moment of sentiment directed his feet toward the red bridge, down the torchlit path, up the circling stone staircase to the balcony where he and June had often sat together. Now this seemed the loneliest spot in the world. He must not linger. Whether June and the others had gone toward Venus or the earth, they would run into untold dangers.

Allison hesitated at the airlocks. He bent to pick up a scrap of paper. It was June's handwriting. He read it swiftly.

Lester might come while you are gone . . . I believe he would want to stay here . . . That is what I have decided to do . . . I know that you will come back. I pray that you may bring Lester.

—June.

Over and over Allison read it.

I shall hide where you can't find me, so please don't delay . . . I know that you will come back. I pray . . .

Up over the cavern paths Allison bounded, a flashlight in his hand, a rope over his shoulder. He called until he was hoarse from shouting. He deserted the well-beaten paths for the many-branched caves that were endless. Up near the cavern ceilings he called, only to hear the echoes of his voice mock him from distant underground canyons. Then he would wait in vain for the silence to give something back to him.

PERHAPS they had persuaded her to change her mind. She *must* have gone. These empty caverns held no living thing. No *living* thing—

The words stuck in Allison's throat. An unfamiliar coldness spread through his body. He forced himself back toward the ship, telling himself that he had looked everywhere—everywhere that June could possibly have gone—

But there was another cave he hadn't explored—and there was another ravine—and another . . .

Hour after hour Allison searched and called. Time after time he started back, only to be stopped by an intangible something. Sometimes he thought he heard faint sounds somewhere out in the blackness beyond the reach of his light. Not the sounds of a voice, not the clatter of a rivulet beating over stones—something fainter, more musical, like the almost inaudible

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hum of a tiny insect.

Hmmmmmmm! Hmmmmmm! The sound melted away into nothing . . .

There it came again, a perfect tone—and another, slightly higher! Where did it come from? This way and that Allison moved quickly. The subtle tones were closer now—and there were three of them—three delicate harmonious notes of a stringed instrument! The zither!

"June! June!" Allison's voice was no more than a clogged, croaking whisper. "June, where are you?"

His ghastly call echoed away into the blackness. No voice answered. Silence—then it came again, as clearly as if it were resounding through a speaker! *Hmmmmm — hmmmmmm — hmmmmm!*

A few more steps, then Allison's light flashed down over an abrupt break in the rocks. The caprices of nature had formed a trap—a triangular dungeon-like pit as deep and straight-walled as a cistern. The flashlight's beam found a white form lying limp on the stony floor.

Allison looked down upon the most pitiful and at the same time the most beautiful face he ever hoped to see.

June O'Neil's eyes were almost closed. Her dry swollen lips were open. Her clothes were in shreds, her fingers were torn and clotted with blood. One limp hand weakly stroked the battered little zither that lay beside her.

In a moment Allison had her in his arms, was whispering to her.

CHAPTER IX

The Long Chance

"YOU poor child," Allison breathed. "So you stayed—for me—"

A slight movement of her white eyelids and a barely perceptible smile that touched her lips were all the response she could give.

Lifting her out with the aid of the rope, which he had knotted into a sort of ladder, Allison carried her to the nearest rivulet. She was near to dying from thirst. Many an hour must have passed since her fall. He wondered if she would live. Gently he bathed her face and her limp body.

An hour later, lying on a cot in the great Mercurian laboratory, she lifted her arms up to Allison and spoke to him, smiling through tears. Those tears looked good to Allison. He knew she was feeling better.

Though the memory of the interminable hours of darkness she had spent in the trap haunted her mercilessly, June O'Neil was quick to regain her strength.

Soon she was able to tell Allison everything—the anxiety of the little Earth group to go to Venus after him; the troubles with the robot ship; the swift hours of work through most of four months, which had at last evolved the two battering rams; her own fateful decision not to go; her fall, the blow against her head that had struck her unconscious, the terror of awakening in the blackness—trapped!

And finally, June concluded, the frantic efforts to break stones from the wall and to carve handholds—only to be overcome by sickness and exhaustion and thirst.

Allison smoothed her hair. She must think no more about it; she must rest, sleep, gain back her strength.

"But you haven't told me a word of yourself, Lester."

As Allison gave her his story, June O'Neil's eyes opened wide.

"And this person Sasho," she said, "will he actually go ahead with such a plan?"

"By this time he is probably starting his whole fleet into motion."

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June was alarmed, but even so she was in no state to imagine the stupendousness of the thing.

"What will the earth do?"

"I'm afraid it's too late for the earth to do anything."

The girl drew herself up on one elbow and looked at Allison intently.

"What about Mary and Smitt and the others? What will happen to them?"

"I don't know."

"What are *we* doing here?" June's voice rang with alarm.

"Waiting for you to regain your strength. I'm not going to leave you again—"

"I'm strong already! And I can gain as well riding through space as here." Firm purpose glowed in the girl's youthful face. "Carry me aboard, Lester."

THEY WERE off.

In addition to their one prisoner, Siccolo, whom Allison had already had aboard after his escape from earth in the S-37, they carried a heavy cargo of molded metals—articles which the automatic Mercurian machines had turned out by the thousands while Allison had been searching for June. During the hour that he had entered the laboratories, he had set the machinery to humming. It was only a crude hunch, he had told himself, but the effort required was so slight that it was worth a try.

"Anyone in the world that makes trouble for Sasho," Allison told June, by way of explaining his curious cargo of hardware, "is doing mankind a favor."

ALLISON set the ship for a straight hard course toward Venus. June walked about on unsteady legs. She surveyed the roomfuls of red metal spears, swords, helmets and shields. There were even a few of the black metal axes which had been left over from the original Mercurian civilization. June wondered if Lester had gone out of his head.

Allison grinned and said he didn't know, perhaps he had. But these were weapons that the machines could turn out most easily and they were weapons that anyone could use. It was his theory that the very possession of a weapon can make a frightened creature bold.

"I hope we can find a few thousand men who'll take a fancy to red hats and sharp spears," he added.

A few hours later, when the S-37 hovered among the silvery clouds high over Venus, June gazed down through the high-powered telescope and saw the few thousand men that Allison had in mind.

Though these people were too far away for their green faces to be seen, June could guess from their primitive-looking mountain camps that they were the hordes of Venusians whom Sasho's cutthroats had robbed and driven off. The Jagged Mountains, their stronghold, was many miles removed from the blue-domed cities that dotted the vast panorama and were now in the hands of Sasho.

"Any activity?" Allison asked. He was busy at the controls, cruising at the lowest possible speed.

"They seem to be holding conferences," June replied. "Do you think they have radios?"

"In all probability."

Radio broadcasts from the Venusian military headquarters were going strong. From the moment the S-37 had come into listening range, June and Allison had picked up messages.

The first thing they had heard was some last minute instructions of no par-

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ticular importance to the departing S-44. The important thing to Allison was that the S-44—the ship whose flame-cloud had unwittingly caught the crew of the S-37—was starting back on a second trip.

Every other ship was gone now, the messages implied. There was a hint of disturbance over the missing S-37, otherwise things were going well. But to make sure they continued to go well, the S-44 was loaded with high-ranking officers who would supervise the fleet's return.

There were numerous other messages, all of them charged with the war spirit and anticipation of the greatest, most complete, military victory in history!

"The Sasho Victory Festival begins today!" boomed a stock announcement every few minutes. "Your attendance is your declaration of allegiance to the Sasho Empire! Your absence brands you as a damned rebel!"

Allison groaned. "No wonder those green-faced Venusians are holding conferences all over the Jagged Mountains. If they venture toward any city to take in the Festival, they'll probably be caught and turned over to the Cutthroats and shot. But if they don't show up, they've branded themselves for life as 'damned rebels'."

Allison looked at his stacks of spears and swords with a sigh. He wished they could have been automatic guns. But the green-faces would run at the sight of a gun, no doubt. Getting spears and swords into their hands was going to be difficult enough—and perhaps futile, at that.

"A large group is heading toward that central plateau over there now," June called down from the observatory through the speaking tube. "You've got plenty of time to get there ahead of them."

IT was a difficult task of piloting for Allison, novice that he was, but within a few minutes he achieved it, landing on the central lookout plateau. Then came the strenuous job of unloading. He wished he could have forced Siccolo to help him, but that yellow-eyed prisoner was not to be trusted outside his cell.

The weapons were stacked in gleaming red piles. Allison had almost finished when the approaching column of green-faces came into sight a quarter of a mile down the trail.

They saw the space ship, turned tail and ran!

"No use trying to reason with those boys," Allison growled disgustedly. "They only understand two English words: *'damned rebel'.*"

Allison took off as quietly as possible. He and June looked down from the high cloud level. What they saw through their telescopes was disheartening. The party of Venusians had switched to a different trail. They feared a trap. All those fine metal weapons might lie untouched forever.

"If they only knew we were their friends," June sighed.

"Too bad. They'll eventually fall before Cutthroat bullets. They could at least go down fighting if they only knew. It's a cinch no Sasho bullet would go through one of those red metal shields."

But Allison's efforts were apparently lost. Messengers sped through the mountain trails from one green-faced group to another, obviously to warn against trouble from the skies. Allison steered back toward the open skies high above the blue-domed Sasho cities.

"What could have become of our two battering rams?" June asked, continuing to scan the vast landscape.

"Perhaps captured," Allison answered quietly.

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It was a dark moment. June sensed that for once Allison was uncertain which way to turn. The earth was a lost cause! The two battering rams containing the nearest and dearest friends in the world—the four young couples from Mercury—had doubtless gone to their unknown doom!

June, acting upon her womanly instincts, went to the supply cupboards and brought forth food. Nothing was so full of inspiration as calories, she said.

Allison returned her brave smile, kissed her. For a brief moment his thoughts flashed back to the wedding that had been postponed. He did not mention it, for all too obviously he saw that that lost hour would never come back. They were in the Sasho maelstrom now. It was up to them to gamble against the fates to the last—and that course certainly led to death.

Suddenly something came in on the radio-telephones that set Allison's imagination aflame. It was a message from the Venusian headquarters — an answer to a clamoring public.

Don't be alarmed about the rumored invasion from Mercury, said the reassuring voice. (So Allison's story of Mercury's millions of warriors had taken root!) The rumored voices from Mercury ships had been heard no more, the broadcast continued.

And Allison fairly shouted, *"Voices! Could that have been Smitt and Laughlin and—"*

June nodded eagerly. "Oh, thank God they're safe!"

The Venusian announcement continued:

"Either the Mercurian report was a false alarm resulting from a confusion of messages, or else the invaders were bluffed out. Nevertheless the spaceship defense guns are keeping a close watch on the skies."

At these words Allison automatically rocketed high out into the heavens. True, his ship bore a safe name, the Sasho-37, but the Sasho gunners, if they sighted a boat that hadn't radioed in, might not stop to read names.

"What now?" June asked in a heartening voice.

"Back to our green-faced natives," said Allison. "We'll try again. There was inspiration in them thar calories you served up," he added with a tight grin.

HE set the controls to circle safely and turned to an equipment cupboard.

"We've got a bunch of space parachutes here. We may as well use them."

As a matter of ordinary precaution, they had already donned space suits and parachutes and had placed oxygen helmets within easy reach. But there were twenty-five or thirty more parachutes—theirs to throw away. That was Allison's inspiration.

He coasted down to within a mile of the tops of the Jagged Mountains, applying counter-motors to slow the ship down almost to glider speed.

At his direction, June threw the parachutes away by way of the disposal chute, one after another. Each parachute was attached to a bundle of red metal hardware—a sword, a spear, a shield and a helmet. Luckily Allison had kept a few of each.

The third parachute fell true. It deposited its bundle in the very center of an unsuspecting group of green-faces. Their surprised faces looked up to see the cascade of red bundles on their way down. The line led directly to the central plateau, where Allison had previously unloaded and stacked thousands of weapons.

"There," said Allison. "We've told

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them we're friends in language plainer than English. Now if they only had a husky fellow about the size of Sasho to use for target practice, they'd be the happiest rebels in the world."

"Good work!" June smiled. "What next?"

"Up into the skies before a telescope spots us."

"Then what?"

Allison took a deep breath. The headquarters radio messages continued to pour in. The Sasho communications staff was stewing for a word from tardy ships.

"Willing to take a long chance? Even though the payoff might be final?"

June nodded.

"We don't have much to work with," Allison observed. "But we've got a Sasho ship and plenty of fuel. And we've got you.

"What can *I* do?" June exclaimed.

"Maybe you can lie," said Allison. "Lies have been my most useful weapon the last four months. Can you?"

"I—I'll try," she stammered breathlessly.

"Okay. We've got a ship, *two* willing liars, a radio transmitter, and a yellow-eyed Sasho officer who's getting tired of his cell. We'll begin by putting Siccolo and the transmitter together!"

CHAPTER X

Fires of Rebellion

ORANGE and silver banners blazed from every blue dome, every public square, every stadium throughout the Sasho cities of Venus. The stadiums and amphitheaters filled rapidly. Throngs of excited, expectant people streamed in from the hinterlands.

Over and over the announcement boomed through thousands of amplifiers:

"The Sasho Victory Festival begins today. Your attendance is your declaration of allegiance. Your absence brands you as a damned rebel!"

Every Sasho stadium contained a four-sided silver tower in the center of the grounds. From each side of each silver tower the televised face of Sasho looked out upon the crowds. From time to time, the voices of officials blared forth from the orange horns that topped the silver towers.

Soon now a volley of fireworks would spurt from the top of every tower, signifying the return of the first ship of the flamer fleet. Then everyone would rise and salute, and the televised face of Sasho would speak and his incomparable voice would thunder from the orange horns. That was the declaration of victory for which everyone waited.

The biggest crowds, of course, were massed at the Capital Stadium. There they could see the real thing—Sasho himself, his bulky head and hunched shoulders looking strangely small in comparison with his gigantic televised image. He and a few other officers occupied the little open platform near the top of the stadium's silver tower.

Here at the Capital Stadium, the eyes of the multitude tired themselves out gazing into the skies. The space ships must return soon. One by one they would fly down out of the mysterious nowhere, bearing proof that Sasho's great plan had been fulfilled.

The flamer ships would return as they had left, twenty minutes apart, as Sasho's time was reckoned. And—thrill of thrills!—they would coast right into the center of the Capital Stadium, one every twenty minutes, each to receive fitting recognition from the mouth of the Emperor.

At first the waiting was not wearisome. Some cruel sports had been

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planned to keep the crowds entertained. Silent airplanes sewed back and forth, portraying the flamer fleet's attacks upon the earth. An explanation of the careful clockwork plans was given.

To the multitude's delight, a touch of realism was added to prove how effectively the gas-clouds could destroy. A specially built plane spread a tiny cloud through one avenue of the stadium, where a few captive green-faced rebels had been placed to represent Earth people.

Ignited, the little cloud barked out a vigorous explosion. The flash of fire was accompanied by many a startled, agonized scream from the victims. Then the crowd saw how quickly and efficiently the purpose had been achieved. Every green-faced rebel's clothes was a mass of flames!

Cheering throngs and blaring bands, freakish sadistic demonstrations and parading young warriors all did their best to keep that handsome smile of victory on the Sasho face.

But the Sasho smile was not at top form. It came and went with bewildering rapidity. It came with effort. Then the big chin would shoot upward, the twisted lips would spread to show angry teeth, and the head and body would quickly turn, as if in answer to some pressing business.

BACK of the scenes all was by no means well. The first of the fleet ships should have radioed in by this time. But no report came.

"Keep up your calls," Sasho muttered.

On the headquarters wavelength the agitated demand continued.

"Come in, Fleet Ship Number One. Come in, Number One! Where are you, Fleet Ship Number One? Do you hear? You should be within an hour of port, Fleet Ship Number One . . . "

Sasho's irritation grew into ill-suppressed rage. Troubles always seared his pride. A slip-up! And this was the supreme event of his life.

The audience began to get restless. It clamored for more demonstrations.

"Call the hinterland guards," Sasho ordered one of his three aides. "Have them pick up some more green-faced rebels and send them in by plane, *pronto!*"

The aide flashed a dubious eyebrow.

"Well?" Sasho roared, inflamed by his assistant's hesitation.

"There's been some border trouble in the last few minutes," said the aide. "Three guard stations have been attacked—"

"Attacked! By Rebels?"

"And the guards have been routed. I've already ordered reinforcements, several motorized reserves—"

"Rebels! Rebels! How the devil—" Sasho was enraged. This was beyond u n d e r s t a n d i n g. He squirmed about, wanting to strike someone with his quirt. But the mirror in front of him caught his eye, reminded him to smile. He forced a half-hearted grimace and quickly turned away.

"Why the hell wasn't I informed?" he snarled.

"You've been very busy," said the aide, "referring to the fleet.

The reminder shot pain through Sasho. He turned to another aide. Any messages yet from returning ships? The aide had none. He'd continued to keep in communication with headquarters, which continued to call.

The third aide delicately hinted that the crowd was sensing a delay.

Sasho bestowed a prolonged smile upon his empire, at the same time rasping from the corner of his mouth,

"For God's sake, think of something!"

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"A speech might be in order, your Majesty," the third aide suggested timidly. "Perhaps a review of the empire's history—the story of your own spectacular career—"

For an instant Sasho was sorely tempted. If he refused a chance to tell the story of his rise, beginning at the age of ten, it would be the first time. But his disturbance over the delayed fleet was too deep. Something had gone wrong. He was sure of it. He should have gone along and supervised the attack himself. Perhaps that idle rumor about Mercury wasn't so idle—

"Another report from the hinterlands, your Majesty," said the second aide.

"Hinterlands, the devil! What now?"

"The rebels have formed a front, your Majesty. They're advancing from the mountains."

"Advancing! The rats are mad! They haven't got anything. I'll turn the Cutthroats loose on them—"

"Your Majesty, the Cutthroats went with the motorized reserves. They're already in the thick of it—"

"*Thick* of it!" Sasho blasted. "You talk as if there's some real fighting."

"Half the Cutthroats are reported slaughtered—"

"H*pfff!*" The Emperor blew up like a steam boiler. He swung his quirt and cut a mark across the second aide's mouth. He drew back for a second blow when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

"A ship!" the first aide blurted. "A ship's just radioed in from a half hour out."

Sasho turned to the mirror and mustered his most gracious smile.

"Go on," he muttered savagely. "What have the damned tardy louts got to say for themselves?"

"It's the lost ship," said the aide, "the S-37."

"*Gimme that phone!* Headquarters! *Put me on that ship!* Hello, S-37! S-37! *Siccolo!* Well, I'll be a fried corpse! What the hell brings *you* home?"

All that the crowds throughout the Sasho Empire could see for the next few minutes was the televised shoulders and back of their Emperor, but every jerk of his sleeves and epaulets seemed to shake the warp and woof of their social structure.

Fresh rumors spread through the crowds. The fleet that had gone to destroy the earth must have met with unforeseen troubles. Perhaps the ferocious millions of Mercury *had* materialized! Perhaps—terrible thought—they would invade Venus!

If so, would they stop at nothing? Or would they only assassinate the higher Sasho officials?

On top of these wildfire speculations, another rumor raced in. The green-faces—the original Venusians—were coming down from the hills in mad hordes. They were advancing like wild men. They were killing and butchering every man who wore a silver-and-orange uniform. They had brand-new, brilliant red weapons—

What was happening to the Sasho Empire?

Many a stony green-faced countenance that had been expressionless for years suddenly lighted with a gleam of hope. If these things went on, that long-dreamed-of time was near at hand—the time to throw off the tyrant's yoke!

"Speak up, Siccolo!" Sasho roared into the phone. "I want the facts! Mechanical difficulties, huh? Working perfectly now, you say. What about the Mercury ambassador? Still with you! No signs of any Mercury ships?

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Well, by God, there's a hitch somewhere! The fleet's hours behind schedule. Ships ought to be pouring in, and not a one's showed up . . ."

Siccolo replied that the fleet was doing fine but was behind schedule, owing to circumstances which he would explain in more detail later.

"Doing fine, is it?" Sasho cursed a bit more softly. If the plan was going through, he could breathe easy. All this petty trouble with rebels and restless subjects wouldn't amount to anything. A victory over the earth would put everything back on an even keel—

"What's that, Siccolo? You brought me a present? *A girl?*"

Sasho's eyes roved past his aides, busy at their troublesome telephones, to the swarming multitudes—vermin, hungry for excitement! Waiting for the return of victorious ships—ships that would be hours late . . .

Humph! A girl, huh? A present from the earth . . . Mmmm!

Sasho was suddenly bored by his surroundings. He wished the Victory Festival were in the opposite corner of the universe. Why not walk out on it? He was Emperor, wasn't he? What the hell's the good of being Emperor if you can't do as you damned please!

SASHO barked back at Siccolo, "Girl? Put her on!"

A moment of waiting, then, "Hello, Mr. Sasho!"

"Say that again!"

"Hel-l-l-o-o-o, Mr. Sasho!"

Damn, what a voice! *What* a voice!

"Coming to see me, are you?" Sasho wished he'd equipped these ships with television.

"I've heard *so* much about you, Mr. Sasho!" the voice cooed.

"Hmmm. Don't you believe none of those stories. Ha-ha! I can tell you worse ones myself. Ha-ha-ha!"

"I thought maybe you'd like to ride down to the earth. It's awfully exciting, with all those fires and so much fighting—"

"Fighting!" Sasho growled. "What fighting?"

"You know—your fleet men, grabbing parts of the earth for themselves, and your officers—"

"WHAAA!" Sasho nearly blew the phone out of his hand. "Put Siccolo back on!"

"Is that ride a date, Mr. Sasho?"

"Put Siccolo back on! . . . Siccolo! What she said—is it true? . . . A regular dog fight; The hell you say! . . . Officers, too? . . . You *lie*, Siccolo! Why, the low scummy devils!"

Siccolo's words continued with such precision that he might have been reading them.

"Would you like to see for yourself? Perhaps you could stem the tide—"

"Chase yourself down here the quickest way! Refuel first, if you need to. I'm in the stadium, and I'm ready as quick as you can get here! Rush it!" Sasho snarled.

To the consternation of his three aides and his corps of guards, Sasho slammed down the telephone, bounded for the enclosed stairway, chased himself up and down it for the next several minutes, hissing,

"Revolt! Revolt! Revolt! I'll hang 'em! I'll fry 'em! The dirty lice—"

A wild cheering rang then through the stadium. The majestic S-37 rolled into the grounds and up to the silver tower.

Without a word to his breathless Empire, Sasho marched straight for the airlocks, entered. His three aides were directly behind him. A corps of guards tried to follow—

The guards didn't make it. The air-

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locks swished shut, the S-37 zoomed off. Out into the skies, out of sight!

Clamorous uproar shook the stadium. Pandemonium seized the scores of stadiums throughout the Empire as a report of this unaccountable action came over the air.

"More trouble on Earth!" a frightened official boomed out over the Empire's system of speakers. "Sasho's been called on an emergency. Earth trouble. There'll be a slight delay—"

Hooting voices drowned the speaker. Earth trouble! Yes, and Venus trouble! The fires of discontent that had cropped out today would not be put out tomorrow—nor the next day—nor the next!

CHAPTER XI

The Final Stroke

SEVERAL hours earlier the earth's most spectacular sky show had begun with a bang! And *what* a bang! The hard claps of thunder reverberated through city buildings like a minor Earth tremor.

But the bangs were not placed where the Sasho flamer ships meant to place them. Every bang went off prematurely—miles up in the air.

The North American continent watched, held its breath, wondered whether these two marvelous little red battering rams from Mercury could keep it up.

Every twenty minutes another terrific explosion occurred. Gradually the scene shifted, east to west, across the broad continent.

Every twenty-minutes the short-wave radios picked up the routine messages of the approaching attackers.

"Ship Number Seven calling Ship Number Eight.

"Okay. What's the report, Number Seven?"

"Ship Number Six reported twenty minutes ago. It descended on schedule. Its flame-attack was visible soon afterward over area Number Six.

"Okay, Number Seven."

"We're cutting into air over Area Number Seven. Our flame should be visible shortly."

"Do your worst, Number Seven. We're twenty minutes behind you, descending on Area Number Eight on schedule."

IT HAD been terrifying business the first time, especially for Mary Smitt and the Redmans. But Smitt had been thoroughly nerved up to it. He had missed Ship Number One on his first two trials; but the third time he had sped by it, he had caught onto the system.

He had shot ahead, looped back through a full cloverleaf turn, and his electric-eye detector had taken care of the rest. They had smashed squarely through the nose of Ship Number One. It had fallen apart as if it had been so much tissue paper.

A quick glimpse, and the story was all over. They could look back and see the vast gas flames leaping out in all directions like an exploding star, as the disintegrating Sasho ship blew up.

Reports from the earth observers were that a few splinters of metal and bits of uniformed bodies hailed down after every explosion. Mary winced, but her companions reminded her that these were the fleet ships that had been ordered to fry the earth to a cinder, blast any interfering Mercury ships to atoms!

Blast Mercury ships to atoms! What a laugh Smitt had out of that. Ship Number One had bounced three shells off the hull of his fighter and he had hardly felt the jar.

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In the other battering ram, Laughlin and his wife and Bob and Betty Wakefield followed the scene of action close to the surface. They kept in touch with Smitt by radio, but their offers to take over the ramming job were refused.

"Not a chance," Smitt would retort. "I've got my system. You might miss one learning. Keep up your search for Allison. He's got to be on the earth somewhere."

"But you'll wear out if these attacks keep coming—"

"Wear out, hell! This is recreation! I haven't had so much fun since that Fourth of July when my Uncle George forgot to lock up his dynamite. S'long. It's time for another ship!"

ONCE during the siege, the two battering rams arranged for a trade, and Smitt took off in the fresh boat. His original fighter had begun to feel the crashes. But after the shift of passengers, Smitt flew back into action. The crashes went on with the very superb clockwork that Sasho had so carefully planned the other way around.

"I'll bring down everything that comes down out of the sky!" was Smitt's last communication before his radio went dead.

It was just one of those many jolts of busting through the nose of a Sasho ship that queered the radio. And no one had time to fix it. But that made no difference, for Smitt and his party had learned that they could spot the approaching enemy miles above the stratosphere.

"We're doing a thousand percent," Smitt grinned fiercely, "and we're gonna keep that batting average pure!"

He shot along past a ship emblazoned S-44—the ship bearing Sasho's principal staff officers! A few seconds later the S-44 was nothing but a memory and flying splinters!

There was a long wait before another ship came, but eventually one did come, and Smitt's party sighted it speeding down toward the stratosphere.

SASHO'S EYES screwed up, his jaw jutted, he laughed through his yellow teeth. It was the laugh of a demon. He strode forward, brushing past the two aides who had entered the ship with him, and who now held guns on Lester Allison and June O'Neil. The third aide had taken over the controls.

"Out with it, you lousy Earth worms! How were you going to kill me?" Sasho snarled.

Allison pressed his lips tightly. Things hadn't gone so well the last few minutes. As long as he and June had been locked in the control room, they had been all right. They had kept the ship rocketing for the earth at top speed. Dressed in their space togs, their backs turned to the cabin beyond the transparent partition, their identity had been concealed.

But as soon as Sasho and his aides had pranced through the ship from end to end, finding no one, not even Siccolo —whom Allison had dropped off safely on Venus—the storm had broken.

The transparent partition had not been immune to bullets. Allison and June had come out when they were ordered to do so. That was as they had planned it. They would have to come even if the aides hadn't crashed two shots through the partition.

They had advanced with their hands up, the aides had relaxed a trifle; then Allison, his hands still reaching, had caught a gun from over the control-room door.

That was as he had planned it. But he had not planned for the gun to jam. At the moment he would have taken the situation over with gunfire, a sterile

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click! let him down!

"Don't tell me you'd have let me off with shooting!" the irate Sasho roared. He snapped his quirt against his silvered boot.

How Allison would have killed Sasho, had the best of luck been with him, had been the least of Allison's worries. Probably he would have dispatched him the quickest way. Certainly he would never have turned the man loose upon the world, even as a prisoner, once he had him.

"Don't tell me you'd have done me up in a hurry!" Sasho taunted. "I'm not gonna do *you* up in a hurry! I'm gonna have a fancy bit of sport with you—both of you."

The flash of Sasho's eyes at June was chilling to the blood. Allison breathed hard.

HE remembered suddenly that he had once slid a few black Mercury axes beneath a bench in this middle compartment. He wondered if the aides would get careless with those guns in time, if he played the game right.

June's arm trembled slightly against his own. Sasho paced the floor. And Allison stood like a statue.

It was far more than two lives that hung in the balance—June's and his own. It was the fate of three planets. From what Allison had gathered of the Venus situation, he surmised that Sasho's triumph or failure would make or break the Empire. That realization had given Allison his strategy. If only he could throw a monkey-wrench squarely into the machinery of Sasho's horrible scheme—

"Come out of it, you skulking rat," Sasho seethed. "If you've got any last words for your dictator, out with them! I'm gonna go down and pay him a visit before long—him and his metals."

"Tell him," said Allison in a cool defiant tone, "that it was my last wish those metals be used for a solar defense machine for peaceful nations—a defense machine that would crush men like you to dust!"

Snap!

Sasho's quirt cut a thin line from the top of Allison's forehead down toward his left eye. It must have struck a burning blow that partially cauterized, for the cut hardly bled.

June's breast rose and fell deeply. She clung as if by her fingertips to a faint wisp of blind unreasoned hope that they might live through this hour. *If* they did—and *if* that line across Lester's forehead should remain a permanent scar, June knew she would always be proud of it.

Again Sasho paced the floor. He had never been in a more dangerous mood than this. Though he was thoroughly jubilant over having exploded the revolt bubble, he was thoroughly enraged over having been taken in by Allison's scheme. But above all, he was hotly disturbed about his fleet.

After all, the only trouble he had scotched was a fake one—that of traitorious ships and officers. But where were those ships? Why couldn't the radio get in touch with them?

A few hours later he came down from the observatory with an easier jog and a surly, secretive smile. He had seen a few explosions, so he thought, through the telescope. One of them he had been certain of. Probably that had been the S-44 delivering the final blow. He regretted that the S-37 had no flame-gas aboard.

An inspiration came to him on the matter of taking care of Allison and June.

"I've missed out on all the big explosions," he grunted, "but there'll still be fires, plenty of them. And I've got a

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notion I'd have more personal interest in these fires," here he stopped and glared at the two prisoners, who sat across the room from their guards, "if I just knew some of the folks that were in on them!"

With that plan of action in mind, Sasho smiled cynically enough to forget his bigger worries. He checked over the space suits and parachutes that June and Allison wore.

He'd let them float down into the thickest blaze he could find!

AS they neared the earth, Sasho became disturbed because he couldn't locate any strips of flame. His aide at the radio tried in vain to tune in some unseen Sasho ship.

"What the devil!" the aide at the radio muttered. "The short waves are screaming all over the place, trying to locate Allison!"

Sasho took the phones and listened. He laughed like a sandblast. He tuned in the transmitter and bellowed taunts back at the earth announcers.

"This *is* rich! Your prize is already taken, numbskulls! I've got him and his girl friend right by the nape of the neck. If you want to see them, you can see them in hell in a very few minutes! . . . Who am *I?* I'm—" Sasho stormed with laughter. This was too good. "I'm the Emperor that's just got through fryin' the Earth's pants off. I'm Sasho, by God!"

He roared his laughter into the transmitter. Then with a stroke of irony that was exactly to his taste, he said:

"Maybe you'd like to have a chummy little talk with Allison before his hair burns off and his toenails curl up? Yeah? Come here, you damned rat! Tell your friends about your fancy little tricks."

Allison and June, with space helmets in hand, put on the earphones. Sasho pranced across the floor, laughing. For the moment the radio was all their own.

"This is Allison. I'm aboard Sasho's S-37. June's with me. We're in a hole."

"I'll say you are," came Bob Wakefield's low mutter. "Don't you know the battering rams are smashing every Sasho boat to hell! Smitt's taking everything that comes down."

"Let him come!" Allison whispered fiercely, and June nodded her quick approval. "We're sunk already. Anything to get Sasho!"

"Smitt'll get you, all right," Wakefield groaned. "I couldn't stop him—his radio's dead. He'll smack you square through the nose! Can't you make a jump for it?"

That was all. A pained bellow from Sasho brought Allison and June up sharply. They saw no reason for his pain at first. He stood glaring at a porthole, his paunchy hulk frozen. Red light reflected across his silver headdress.

Then they saw. Swiftly it shot by—Smitt's sleek red metal battering ram, tapering off into a tail of flame. It was gone.

"The gun!" Sasho thundered. He and his two aides stormed up the stairway. The anti-aircraft gun groaned and the ship shuddered.

Allison and June fastened their helmets on securely. The aide at the controls shot a glance at them—his own business was too pressing to do more. Together the two fugitives dashed for the disposal chute.

It was locked.

Allison grabbed an ax from under a bench and shattered a porthole. The glass blew out. He boosted June to the opening.

The sound conductors in his helmet brought them thunder of footsteps down the stairs. He whirled to see Sasho's

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SATELLITE OF DESTRUCTION

By Burt B. Liston

Absolute peace — or total annihilation. The Fradians made no compromises. But how can you be firm in a changing world?

THE UNIFORM, custom-made to Lydia Grey's own design, was bedraggled and stained, and hung on her drooping figure like green sacking. Her face, once the joy of the society pix boys, was hardly recognizable for the film of dirt which covered it, and to make matters worse, a thorn briar had laid a bloody track across one cheek.

She was a mess, Jack Higgins decided.

Worse, he was stuck with her.

It seemed the tenth time she had asked the same question: "Are you sure you know where we are?"

And for the tenth time, he made the same reply: "Yeah. My old man was a scoutmaster. Can't lose Jack Higgins. Not even in this damned wilderness. Oh! Sorry." He turned, so she wouldn't see the expression of worry, and looked narrowly at the wall of brush before them, as if trying to pierce its secret with his glance alone.

This time, she wasn't satisfied with his answer. "Why don't you admit we're lost? And for Heaven's sake, stop babying me!"

His lean face, handsome and saturnine as a satyr's, smoothed itself of worry lines and took on the expression of cold contempt with which she was so familiar. "Miss Grey," his words were as cold as his eyes and mouth, "I didn't ask to have you assigned to me. Colonel Bennington

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arranged that. When we return, I shall give the old bat my compliments, and tell him to go to hell! Does that make you feel better?"

"The only thing that would make me feel better is the sight of the regimental headquarters. And some food. I'm so hungry..."

He heard the fear in the background of her words, realized suddenly how close to hysteria she was, and stepped to her side. He patted her shoulder gently.

"Take it easy, kid," he cautioned. "Better wait till we get back to quarters before turning on the tears."

She shrugged his hand from her shoulder with an irritable gesture. "When we get back... As if you believe that."

"All right," he said coldly. "So I don't believe it! Does that make you feel better? Do you want me to say we're lost on this damned satellite, a hundred thousand miles from Earth, and we don't have the slightest chance of getting out of this alive? If you do, you're crazy. Jack Higgins isn't built on those lines."

A HEAVY sigh escaped her as she rose from the slimy rock she had been resting on. Her eyes fell to the rent in her blouse through which could be seen the swelling breast, barely hidden by the last of the flimsy bras she had brought along from New York She made haste to cover the tear, but stopped with the apparent futility of it all.

She moved past him along the faintly defined foot trail leading up the steep hillside. He bit his lips and clenched his fists. Then, sighing as though in echo to her, he ran forward the few steps which separated them and passed her, taking the lead.

His lithe, athletic body bent against the angle of the slope. He did not dig his heels in as she did, but walked from the whole foot forward. He had tried to show her how to walk the hills they had traversed, but she had perversely refused to listen. Now, it was torture for her to move. Yet, she would rather have died than cry out. She thought she was being brave; he thought she was a damned fool.

He crested the rise, bent low, and as she plodded up to meet him, he suddenly turned and threw himself on her, knocking her sprawling. Before she could cry out in protest, he clamped a rough hand over her mouth.

"There's something moving below!" he whispered hoarsely. "Shut up!"

She wrenched his hand away and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "You almost strangled me, you idiot!"

"Sorry. Didn't have time to warn you. Now, stay put till I take a closer look...."

He crawled away from her, and a couple of seconds later was lost from sight. She looked down at her left hand stretched out before her. The fingers were set and stiff, and she didn't know whether she had set them so in involuntary anger.

THE SUN was dying behind him, and he knew he would be hard to detect. Still, he took care and stayed as close to the ground as was possible. Below, all was still. For a second, he thought the movement he had seen was a case of jangled nerves. Then, quite suddenly, he knew it wasn't nerves. Something moved below.

He blew his breath out in a silent whistle of relief.

The Fradians were not blond....

"Hey, down there," he kept his voice low.

Once more, there was stillness.

"Look up here. I'm an American. Third Headquarters...."

A lighter green something showed

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against the much darker green of the brush. The brush parted and five figures came out. Four of them wore steel helmets, stained a mottled tan. The fifth was bare-headed and blond. While the others carried high-power rocket rifles, the blond wore only a holstered blast gun. They were all dressed in the uniforms of the Inter-Allied Army.

Higgins scrambled down to meet them.

THE BLOND'S name was Arndt, and he was a Captain. He looked with speculative curiosity at the girl until her name was mentioned. Then, his eyes went wide.

"Not the Miss Lydia Grey?"

"Yes," Higgins said dourly. "The Miss Lydia Grey, darling of the Third Headquarters, and the niece of Joshua Grey, owner of Grey's Newspaper Alliance. Just to set you straight, Captain."

The fair skin went brick-red. "I don't like your tone, Higgins!" Arndt said coldly.

"I can't help what you like," Higgins shrugged. "I'd like to get back to headquarters. Think that could be arranged?"

Arndt smiled. "Y'know, Higgins, if it weren't that Miss Grey is with you, I'd let you find your way back alone. Fortunately for you, we'll have to do our best to see you get back safely!" There was a scornful edge to the last word.

"Thank the man, Miss Grey," Higgins said, and stepped past the Captain toward the enlisted men standing in a group a few feet off.

One of the four was a buck sergeant; the others were privates. The sergeant was a gangling southerner, hollow-cheeked, slack-jawed and with a blank expression in his eyes. But Higgins knew there was more to the man than showed on the surface. These were combat troops, not rear echelon men. Higgins acted with deliberate unconcern.

"Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to get back," he ventured.

The sergeant rolled something around in his jaws turned his head for an instant and spat a brown stream to the ground. "Maybe," he drawled softly in his Georgia accent. "And maybe not. Reckon you could call us advance-advance units."

Higgins mulled that over. "What's between us and our men?" he asked shrewdly.

The sergeant shrugged his bony shoulders. "Hard to tell. We been moving since 'fore sun-up, and we still ain't nowhere."

So they were as lost as he and the girl, Higgins thought. Not a pleasant thought. These men had been cut off from their outfit; perhaps there had been a battle, perhaps merely a skirmish. But from their looks they had not come out victors.

"I'm Jack Higgins of International Press," he said. "How about giving me the story?"

One of the privates, whose spotty week-old growth of beard showed his youth, whistled gently. "Hey serg! This guy's all right. Didn't you ever read his stuff?"

"Who's got time to read?" the sergeant asked. But the fact that one of his squad knew of the stranger in the field-green of a correspondent's uniform, made an impression on him. "Look, Higgins," he continued after a quick glance toward his Captain. "This is straight. We're as lost as you and the young lady. Our company got cut up bad at a river crossing last night. Those green devils were waiting for us. We managed to get away. But we're lost now all right."

Like babes in the wood, Higgins thought. He kept his face straight, not wanting them to read what went

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on in his mind. He thought back on that fateful day just six months before, when the radios and televisors had blared and shown the strange visitor from another Universe. A huge asteroid, the astronomers had called it, a satellite whirling about the Earth in a direction opposite to that of the familiar moon. Its presence was not known or suspected until it had almost reached the Earth's outer atmospheres. Then, the men on Mount Wilson spotted it and warned the world.

There were many suicides that sunset, and a planet huddled in fear as night fell and the asteroid slowed down in its mad flight. Would it stop, or would it crash into the Earth? For days afterward, scientists puzzled over the strange deceleration and, finally, the complete rest of the asteroid. And when the news was flashed that the strange Heavenly visitor would not crash and that there would be another satellite to the Earth, men knelt and prayed, and the angers of nations against one another were forgotten in universal thankfulness.

A week went by and nothing happened.

Once more, there was only the news of small wars being fought, as if in preparation for the larger wars to follow. Men died on this battlefield or that, and in the privy councils, decisions of attack and defense were made. In the cities and towns and fields, life went on as usual.

Then, in the early dawn of a lovely spring morning on the North American continent, there fell the blow which by nightfall was to be heard and felt around the World. There had been no warning; the tiny orange flares which had suddenly sprung up here and there on the face of the asteroid held no meaning. But the giant rockets which had landed with horrible effect on a number of the large cities of the continent showed the real intent of the asteroid.

It was war again! But a war of planets this time!

For two months, the Earth had taken a terrible beating. The Nations forgot their quarrels with one another and joined in common cause against the enemy. Another month passed before plans were made and set into motion to bring the fight to the enemy. Giant rocket transports made landings on the asteroid, to land immense quantities of men and material. And, finally, the beachheads were enlarged for further operations.

And with the first of the rocket transports, there came the correspondents and reporters, among them Higgins. He remembered the first prisoners he had seen, humans, green-skinned tall men, slender, with cruel tight-skinned features, men who boasted openly of what they would do when they landed on the Earth. They spoke a flawless unaccented English; it was learned from them that they had intercepted radio broadcasts in English and had taught the language to everyone on their own tiny planet, Fradia.

The Earthmen had learned many things about the Fradians, but could find no trace of their cities.

"Hey, Higgins!"

Jack Higgins started. For an instant, he looked about in bewilderment. Then, he realized he had walked away from the group of soldiers in his self-absorption. It was the sergeant who had called him back to the present.

"You'll wind up at the bottom of the hill walking like that," the sergeant warned him.

HIGGINS GRINNED wryly His glance shifted from the gaunt unshaven face of the sergeant to the man and woman who were coming toward them. Captain Arndt was talking, his head bobbing now and then,

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giving emphasis to his words. Presently, they were in the midst of the five men.

"I was just telling Miss Grey," Captain Arndt said, "that we'd better wait till nightfall before starting back."

Higgins nodded abruptly. "Let's get something right, Captain," he said. "You're the boss from here on in, and you don't have to ask either Miss Grey or myself anything, or discuss your plans with us."

Once more, the fair-skinned face went red. When Arndt spoke again, it was with obvious effort at control. "I don't intend to, Higgins. Sergeant Byrnes."

"Yes, sir?"

"We'll backtrack down this trail. Have two of your squad up ahead about fifteen yards, and two of them in the rear about the same distance. You'll come with Miss Grey, Higgins and myself."

The slender figure of Jack Higgins stiffened, then relaxed. He didn't know why he had broken out at Arndt the way he had. Certainly he hadn't intended for the Captain to take the course he had decided on. It was too late to make amends, however. The command had been given.

The strange sunset, so quickly turning to night, fell on the satellite. And as they started down the trail the man and girl had come up so short a time before, a file of figures broke into the open at the bottom of the hill and spread themselves into the tall grasses which grew in profusion.

The reflected light from the Earth made things almost as bright as sunlight. It was not difficult to follow the faint trail downward. Presently, the two in advance broke into the open, and immediately went down on their bellies. Immediately afterward, the rest, too, sought the shelter of the tall grass.

For a long moment, nothing moved.

Then, light glinted on the upraised barrel of a rocket rifle, and with the signal, the entire group arose and started swiftly for the patch of scrub forest several hundred yards before them.

And as they moved into action, so did the row of figures which had been lying as though in wait for them.

IT WAS the sergeant who saw them first. His rifle went to his shoulder in a swift movement, and an instant later a tiny rocket sped from it to land before the center of the oncoming wave of green men. It exploded with a dull roar, and when the smoke cleared, several dozen bodies were to be seen lying twisted and motionless on the ground.

But no one had time to look.

Higgins threw a wild look at the girl, who seemed stunned by the mysterious appearance of the Fradians, and hurled himself in a headlong tackle at the girl. She went down as though she had been pole-axed.

Something fell close to where Higgins and the girl lay, and a hoarse voice, thick with a Southern accent said, "Crawl back to the brush, Higgins, 'fore they let go with their fireballs."

"Damn it! You'll have to help me with her," Higgins growled. "I think she's out."

"Miss Grey! Where is she?" a third voice broke in.

"She's here, sir," Sergeant Byrnes said. "Help us with her."

She was dead weight and proved an almost unbearable burden. Byrnes' squad was laying down a heavy barrage of rocket fire, but the Fradians had unlimbered their own guns, and now the orange fireballs were dropping all about them. Liquid fire dripped from the exploding balls and ran in flaming rivulets into every hollow on the ground. One of the squad

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suddenly came to his feet, his clothing ablaze, and ran screaming into the night. Before he had taken more than four steps, he was a flaming torch. A second man leaped erect, tried to beat out the flame with his hands, and died on a choking sound. Then, a third and fourth man fell victim to the chemical fire let loose against them.

Only Sergeant Byrnes, Captain Arndt, Jack Higgins and the girl escaped.

Lydia Grey came to in the nick of time. She felt the hands gripping her and choked back a scream. The sound she made told the three men she had come to her senses. Her fellow correspondent took momentary command.

"Lydia. Run for the brush! We're being attacked."

Higgins looked back and narrowed his eyes against the brilliant light thrown out by the exploding fireballs. He saw dozens of figures charging them. "Hurry it up!" he urged. "They're on our tail."

Fifty more yards, thirty, then only twenty. They were gasping as if with their last breath. But now, they no longer cared that they were in the open, or that the grass was only ankle high. The strong green fibres only slowed them down; it could not stop them.

"Ten more yards," Arndt gasped. He had hold of Lydia Grey's wrist and was actually dragging her in his wake.

"Safe," Sergeant Byrnes whispered exultantly as the forest rose close at hand.

But the Sergeant was wrong. A double line of men stepped forward from behind the first line of trees and stood eagerly awaiting them.

"HALT, OR die!"

Jack Higgins saw their leader raise the strange weapon to his hip, caught the swift move of Captain Arndt's hand toward the blast pistol in his own holster, and chopped swiftly down at Arndt's hand. The pistol clattered to one side.

The correspondent had taken the Captain's measure. The man was quick to anger, and as quick to action. When the command to "Halt," had been given, Higgins instinctively acted before the other. He had been only in time.

But not in time to fend off the lashing fist Arndt threw at him. It caught Higgins on the chin and he collapsed like a punctured balloon.

Then, the green men were all around the four Earth people. A booted foot caught Higgins in the side. He moaned in pain, and as the same foot drove into his side again, he tried to roll with it. He didn't succeed. Another kick and again agonizing pain.

"Stop! You'll kill him!" a woman's voice came to him, but muted, as if from a long distance. Then, something caught him a blow on the temple and everything dissolved in a dark spiral which fell to a bottomless depth.

THERE WAS pain under his armpits, and shocks of pain along the under part of his biceps. He opened his eyes and full consciousness flowed over him.

He was being dragged along by several of the green men. As if they felt his awakening, they stopped and held him erect. He shoved weakly at them.

One of the men pushed him forward so that he staggered. "Walk," he ordered.

Strength returned slowly, though reason came back in a rush. The others. Where were they? It was hard to see. They were in a passage of some sort, a tunnel of rock. Then, his ears caught the sound of footsteps ahead. Still, the turmoil in his brain did not

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lessen. Were those also the footsteps of the girl and Byrnes and Arndt?

Once more, he felt the rough hand shoving him forward, and this time he went gladly, almost at a trot.

Now, his mind was functioning at its accustomed pace. The floor of this tunnel was smooth as a concrete pavement, and though the light was dim, he could see that the sides of it were also smooth. The tunnel wound around on itself, descending as it did. It ended with startling abruptness.

Standing before a pair of gigantic doors was a large group of green men, their uniforms, made of a synthetic material, gleaming as though covered with luminescence. And in their midst, huddled close as if in common protection, were Lydia Grey, Sergeant Byrnes, and Captain Arndt.

They saw him at the same time. Arndt's face darkened, Byrnes' features relaxed their taut look, and the girl's eyes widened. For a second, Higgins' belly contorted in warmth; he would have sworn there was joy in her eyes. Then her glance swept downward, and he was no longer sure.

One of the green men stepped forward. He was somewhat shorter than the rest, but his face was more cruel, his eyes more cold, his expression more unrelenting. For a second, he looked deep into Higgins' eyes, and when the other returned his glance, the green man spat full into the Earthman's face. As Higgins' hand went up to wipe the spittle away, one of the guards slapped him with an open palm.

"Were I Yodar," the green man said, "I would not take prisoners. There must be a reason for it. Well, take care! It would give me pleasure to have you break for freedom."

But if the Fradian expected a retort, he was doomed to disappointment. The tall, lean figure in the stained uniform merely tightened his lips.

The Fradian laughed. "We understand each other then. Good." He whirled on the others. "It goes for all of you! One suspicious move . . ."

Only the labored sound of their breathing gave him answer.

The Fradian cocked his head suddenly at the loud rumbling sound which came from behind the huge doors. Then, the cruel face widened in a broad grin. The vast doors slid open and a gigantic cage was disclosed.

"In, all of you," the stocky Fradian commanded.

FROM THE instant the cage began its descent, Jack Higgins' news sense seemed reawakened. He was still squeezed by the knotty grip of pain with every movement, but he felt it only in his subconscious. Now, he was aware of and felt the importance of what was happening to him. And not only to himself, but to the others with him.

They had been taken prisoners.

The first known prisoners taken by the terrible people from this dark asteroid . . .

Every one of his senses, trained through years of learning and experience to extract from externals the facts to be used, was now completely on the alert. If, he thought, escape were possible, the information he would be able to bring back would be both invaluable to the staffs of the Inter-Allied armies, and news that would be a world scoop for his paper.

Someone in authority named Yodar had ordered their capture. Perhaps not theirs specifically but prisoners of one kind or another. There was a reason for it obviously. Higgins wracked his brain searching for the reason.

The cage stopped with the lightness

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of one feather falling against another, the doors slid open and the length of a long corridor was revealed. Green-skinned guards stood at attention in regular intervals down the length of the corridor. Men and women, not in the familiar Fradian uniform, moved swiftly along the marble-like flooring into one room or another. Nor did they pay the smallest attention to the prisoners as they marched along enclosed behind their wall of guards.

Presently, the squad stopped before a pair of huge graven doors before which stood two green men. The stocky warrior said something in a strange tongue to one of the guards, and the man turned and stepped into the room. He was back shortly, holding the doors wide open for entrance. Only the squad leader came into the room with his prisoners.

The room into which they stepped was large and square in shape. Light from a hidden source gave off an even glow, and as they moved deeper into the room, they became aware of the soft beat of hidden engines doing mysterious work. But all these were set in the background of a more important fact—the room's Fradian occupants. These were five in number, three men and two women. They were seated about a table on which many papers lay scattered, and before two of the men were a couple of triangular-shaped microphones.

Higgins noted the snow-white hair of one of the men, in contrast to the auburn of the rest. It was this one who received the salute of the stocky Fradian who had been their guide.

"There were four others, Yodar, but they died in battle."

"These will do."

The stocky one saluted again, did an about-face and stepped from the room without another word.

Yodar's skin had the look of green satin; it was smooth as a child's. His expression was one of studied calculation, the others', of studied indifference. He fingered his chin for a couple of seconds, while his dark eyes moved over their figures as though in appraisal. Then, he nodded shortly and stood up. Moving deliberately to the mapped wall at his left, he motioned the four to his side.

"You will observe," he said, "that this is a scale map of a part of one of your continents, and embraces all of the country called United States. This country is the arsenal for all the other nations, the center of arms manufacturing. We have recently intercepted radio messages emanating from the secret capitol of the country which ask for agreement from the other nations on an all-out atomic war against us.

"Acceptance would be a folly beyond endurance!"

"What do you mean?" Jack Higgins found himself demanding.

"It would be complete and final extinction, not only for the human races on both our worlds, but also a planetary catastrophe."

Yodar went on, tapping the map as he talked: "The peoples of your planet know nothing of us because of the short-sightedness of a faction within what was, until recently, the governing body of Fradia. Now, we are split in two. On one side, to use figures of speech, 'good', and on the other, 'bad'." A gentle smile broke on the sensitive lips of the old man. "I see the Captain smiles. Perhaps it is his thought that we will be easier prey now that we are split? If so, let him dismiss it instantly. But I digress. Come. Let us make ourselves comfortable while we talk."

The old man went back to the table and motioned the Earth people to pull up chairs close by. "I think it is high time that our purpose in first coming to your planet was ex-

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plained, and our desires made known," he said. "We are from a Universe beyond the farthest reaches of your telescopes, and it took us the equivalent of two light years in travel to reach your own Universe. In all our travels, past the thousands of planets which seemed habitable, we found none whose atmosphere was acceptable, or whose essential elements were so akin to ours as this Earth you inhabit.

"This whirling asteroid we are on and in whose shell we live, took a hundred years in the making, and five years in the launching. The death of the planet we lived on was forecast for several hundreds of years before the fact. And not only the death of the planet, but also the death of the entire Universe of which we were a small part. Therefore, we are escapees from certain doom.

"Although you are not aware of it, we have been residents of your upper atmospheres for two years. This, because we had to make sure that there was life here to sustain the twenty millions of our people who made the inter-spacial journey. More, we had to learn all that was possible of the kinds of peoples on your planet, and whether they would accept us peaceably. There were those among us who argued from the first for war. I was not one of these. But I and those with me were a minority. You know the result.

"Now, I desire a change. Peace. But not peace at a price. I want absolute peace."

"So that what?" Higgins took it upon himself to act as spokesman.

"So that this war shall be ended at no further cost."

"Being the aggressors," Higgins said, "I would say—off-hand—and of course not in an official manner—that you wouldn't stand a chance. Any terms made would have to be made by the nations of the Earth. The attack which began the conflict was a sheer act of aggression, and a vow was made to continue the war until all of you were eliminated."

Yodar spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "You must believe me when I reiterate this conflict was not of our doing. But we had no choice in the matter. Now, we have forced the issue. I know peace can come much more quickly than is thought possible, but it will take cooperation. You and the young lady must bring our point of view to the notice of your governments."

"If not?"

"Orlando will first destroy your planet, and because he has an overwhelming preponderance of fighting men, will conquer us who oppose him internally. I assure you he has the power to do it. There are many things of which you cannot possibly be aware, one of those being that Orlando has the power-machines in his orbit of influence, and with those can do irreparable damage."

"Won't destroying our planet destroy yours?" Higgins asked shrewdly.

"Remember that we came suddenly into your sight; we can leave as mysteriously and suddenly. And from a distance beyond danger, Orlando can unloose powers greater than the atomic bombs of which you are so proud."

"I'll buy that on your word," Higgins said. "What's your proposition?"

"This. Fradia is composed of two cities, fifty miles below the surface, impregnable to assault from above, even to atom bombs. We here control one of the cities, the smaller one, Rodani. Orlando controls Mitani. We also control the gates and pressure chambers from the surface to our city."

"Pressure chambers?" Higgins asked blankly. It dawned on him then that there hadn't been any change in pressure, and if, as the old man said, they were fifty miles below the sur-

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face, there should have been a tremendous change.

Yodar smiled again. "We know many marvels of science which would be of benefit to the peoples of your planet, if peace could be obtained. The trouble is that Orlando has gone too far. He knows it, and is prepared for any consequences. Well, we are too. Civil war, if it means death to all. Earthman, with the help of the peoples of your planet, we can win. Will you try to obtain that help?"

Jack Higgins felt the deep sense of conviction in the old man's voice, and was stirred by it as he had never been stirred by anything before. He had seen and been part of two world wars, and his experiences had only hardened the cynical outlook he had on life. He had the fortune, or misfortune as he called it, of being on the inside of the many shady deals undertaken by the State Departments of various nations, and politicians and slogan-peddlers made no impression on him.

Yodar was of another stripe. The consciousness of the old man's strength and moral power which he had felt dimly at first, had grown with every word. And now, at the last, Higgins had no doubts of the other's sincerity. There remained only the question of how Higgins was to get back to Earth.

"WE ARE fully prepared for this civil war," Yodar assured the other. "The instant you leave on your mission I will set the machinery in motion. Then, Orlando will be forced to withdraw his fighting men from the surface, and the Earthmen will have free play above. Now, here," he gathered up a folio of papers, thrust them into an envelope, sealed it and handed it to Higgins, "are the full-scale plans we had drawn up for the moment of invasion. They show the various air vents and lift openings by which your armies can obtain entrance to our cities. They also are detailed as to strategic points, both strong and weak, and give a close approximation of the dispersal of Orlando's inner defense forces.

"A ship is in readiness to leave at this very instant. It waits only your presence."

"I'm ready to go," Higgins said. "But first—"

"Yes?"

"What about my friends? Miss Grey is also a correspondent. It wouldn't be fair or right that I should have the exclusive on this."

"Well, don't play the hog, Higgins," the girl said. "And besides, I think it'll be more fun down here. You can have the glory. I'll manage without your gentle presence."

He saw her fingers go up to stroke the side of her jaw, and he knew she did it to remind him she had not forgotten his flying tackle.

"I don't think we'll miss him too much, do you, Captain Arndt?"

"Not at all," Arndt said. "Not at all." He gave Higgins the full benefit of a wolfish grin.

"Good! And now, we've settled that, mind if I offer a suggestion, Miss Grey? You've always beefed about there being so little to report for your feminine readers. Perhaps now you'll have a field day?"

"In more ways than one, Mister Newshawk, and thank you."

YODAR WORE a slightly bewildered expression at all this. He felt the undercurrent of hostility between the man and woman, but couldn't understand it. "Do not worry about your friends," he hastened to assure Higgins. "They will be taken care of."

And quite suddenly, something which had lain at the back of Higgins' mind came to the fore. "I hope they will be," he said.

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"You have my word," Yodar replied. And then, as if in answer to the questions the other was afraid to ask: "I gave explicit orders for your capture. The four who died were killed by some of Orlando's men. Our viewing scopes followed you and the others until you started to cross open ground—"

"How did you know all that?"

Yodar's eyes twinkled. He flicked a switch at the side of one of the microphones. The low sound of a voice was heard, speaking in a strange tongue: "A central listening post," Yodar explained. "His voice is recorded on wire; messengers arrive and depart at intervals with the information received by the robot listening post. You and the woman were spotted the instant you came into the viewing screen, and we knew by your uniforms you were correspondents. It was then I decided on your capture, if possible. Had Gaga and his men arrived sooner, there would have been no deaths."

There were no longer any questions. "I'm ready, Yodar," Higgins said. "That is, I will be in a second." The familiar twisted grin appeared on his lips as he walked to the girl. His eyes were almost hidden behind narrowed lids so that she could not read them. "Luck, kid," he said. "I'll get in touch with your Uncle first thing and tell him you're all right."

Her own eyes went wide at his words. They were unexpected, as was the warmth of them. She swallowed hard, managed a smile. "You're not such a bad guy after all," she said. Then, her fingers were on his lapels, drawing him toward her, and a second later the sweet warmth of her lips met his in a swift caress. "Luck, Jack . . ."

"One last thought," Yodar interrupted. He depressed a tiny lever close to his hand, and a second later the doors swung wide. "Haste. Orlando, too, knows of the Earth's decision to use atom bombs."

THERE WERE three men in the squad accompanying Jack Higgins. Their leader was the stocky Gaga. The newsman wasn't happy about Yodar's choice of a pilot, but there was nothing to be done about it. Jack Higgins' recollection of the slap he had received from the man was still fresh in his mind. But if the memory was fresh in Higgins' mind, it seemed to have slipped from the stocky Fradian's. If there was no friendliness in his manner, there was at least an acceptance—even though cold—of Higgins as an ally.

But no matter what his feelings, he had committed himself to a course. He stepped along with the others down the length of the corridor to a pair of now-familiar closed lift doors. These were opposite in direction from those from which they had arrived. And when the lift came, they went downward for the space of a couple of seconds. When the gates opened, Higgins' mouth popped open in surprise. A moving platform, much like a horizontal escalator, confronted them. A low and shallow series of steps led to the platform. He followed Gaga and the others onto the moving roadway and slumped onto the long bench which ran the length of the entire car.

For a moment or so, the platform moved in the soft interior light of the building. Then, suddenly, they were out of the building and on an immense bridge, supported by slender legs of metal. And now, their platform picked up speed. He looked down and saw that there were other platforms below, and below those still more, until only the dimly seen street showed its flat surface. He realized they were on the very topmost of the platforms, and that it was several hundred feet above street level.

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He saw also the immensity of Yodar's city and the architectural simplicity of its design. There were other things to note in passing: The exterior light, brighter but yet as soft as that indoors, the air so spring-like, the curving ceiling of smooth granite, as though it were machined and cut to measure; reaching its arch fifty miles above their heads.

"How come we're the only ones on this platform?" he asked.

"We have the highest priority," Gaga said shortly.

Higgins thought, I don't like you, and, brother, some day you and I are going to tangle about that slap.

"Here we are," Gaga said.

Higgins could only stare at what confronted them. The platform had come to a stop by the side of a stationary platform, at the far end of which was a metal chute which went straight up to end in the curving dome above. He followed Gaga and the others down the platform to the edge of the chute. And once more they were confronted by closed doors, which, when opened by the press of a button at the side, revealed the interior of an elevator.

"This lift will take us to one of the hangars," Gaga explained. He gave the Earthman a sidelong look. "There are others, also, most of which end at ground level."

"You mean this thing goes straight up in the air fifty miles without support?" Higgins was stupefied by what Gaga had said.

"You are surprised?" Gaga smiled. "We have even greater wonders for you to see." He stepped into the elevator, and shortly afterwards the low hum of the efficient motors told them they were on their way up.

THE HANGAR was a vast, low cavern, the ends of which were lost in darkness. Directly before them were several dozen sleek space ships whose design meant them for speed. The hangar was swarming with green warriors. Immediately on their arrival, they were brought to the commander of the hangar, a tall, lean man with the look of tautness to his face which Higgins associated with all airmen, irrespective of planet.

The commander had been informed of their arrival, and he took them personally to one of the small ships and shook hands with the Earthman.

"May your way be lighted by good fortune," he said.

A couple of minutes later, a crane was hoisting the tiny ship to the cavern ceiling. Gaga was alone in the pilot's compartment. The other two kept Higgins company in the main cabin.

"How much higher do we get lifted?" Higgins asked.

"Look," one of the green men said, pointing with his thumb to the closest porthole.

"We're flying! But I didn't hear—"

"The engines of these craft are silent."

Higgins sighed. "I only hope they don't take pot shots at us before we are able to land."

"They won't even see us," the same man said. "Our anti-light deflector will make us invisible until Gaga sends his wave message. The ship is painted jet-black, and the deflector will throw aside any light which might make us visible."

"And they say the Chinese are clever," Higgins said in a whisper.

"We've been on our way thirty seconds," the second green man said reflectively. "But the sphere below hasn't increased in size to any degree."

The pleasant expression of the first green man faded. A worried look broke on his forehead. "I think I'll see what Gaga has to say about this."

The door to the pilot's compartment

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closed on him. Several seconds went soundlessly by. Presently, the door opened again. And a man staggered out. The man's hands were tearing the clothes from his body. The green skin was now so dark it looked black.

"Gaga ... betrayed ... betrayed us..." The lips opened again but only to let out a single agonized shriek.

Then, the man exploded. Flesh and blood and bones spattered the walls, ceiling, floor, in an oozy mess that momentarily nauseated the Earthman. Then, he was aware of a popping sound, a man's voice screaming, "No!" and he looked up in time to see the second Fradian tearing at his clothes as the first did. And seconds later, he also flew to horrifying bits.

"Give me a chance to do it to you," Gaga snarled from the doorway. A small pistol-shaped weapon was in his right hand. The muzzle of the weapon was fixed unwaveringly on the Earthman's body. "Toss the envelope to me." He stooped to pick it up, but kept his eyes on Higgins. "Now. I should exterminate you also, but perhaps Orlando might have a use for you. Keep in mind, Earth vermin, that I beg the chance to kill you."

"Big talk from a little guy," the Earthman said. "But I suppose the little pop gun in the fist makes you boss."

"This is one of the weapons which will make us all masters."

The Earthman measured the distance between them. Too far. He could never make it to stop the other from pulling the trigger. But if he could get just three feet closer....

Suddenly, Higgins slumped to the bench. "Guess I know when I've lost. Go ahead. Do what you want."

Gaga grinned. He had bad teeth and they showed in a crooked row. The grin looked more like a snarl. He came closer until he was but a couple of feet from the man slumped on the bench.

"You will be like this mess of scum on the floor and walls," Gaga said. His voice was suddenly hoarse and thick. "A single pellet deep within you, and seconds later—you saw what happened, Earth vermin?"

Higgins leaned back against the sloping metal wall. His mind raced. He's close enough. If I can only get enough drive in my right leg? Now or never....

He left the bench in a headlong tackle. The Fradian tried to bring the gun in his hand to a point, but a flying leap knocked him backward against the opposite bench. Pounding fists beat a tattoo against his face, and suddenly a knee drove its bony cap deep into his groin. Gaga screamed in agony, dropped the pistol and tried to bring his hands down to his groin. Again the knee came up and pain rode through the lower part of the Fradian's body in a blinding flash. Then, something slammed against the bone along the lower side of his jaw and the world went black.

The tall, slender man took a couple of slow backward steps and looked down at what had been a man. There was only a bloody mess of what had once been Gaga's head. Higgins looked at the pistol in his hand. The butt was dripping blood and tiny slivers of bone and grey matter.

He couldn't remember how the pistol had come to his hand.

NOW WHAT? he asked himself. He looked up through red-rimmed eyes and saw the door of the pilot's cabin swinging lazily back and forth on its hinges. He staggered forward and into the tiny enclosure. A complicated and unfamiliar instrument panel with the dials in a language he couldn't read.

His glance swung emptily to the

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glass port in front of him. A dark mass was rising before him. He stared at it for a full three seconds. Then, comprehension dawned. They were coming back to Fradia. But to where on the asteroid? What was it the green man had screamed before he had d i e d? "Gaga...betrayed us..." Of course. Gaga had set an automatic course for an Orlando landing area. If only he could get the ship back to manual control.

Now, he could see the spears of earth he knew to be mountains, blossom into hills, and shortly their heights were appreciable. His fingers flew to the various dials and levers. A wild shout of exultation broke from his lips. The ship had suddenly wavered in its downward course. He had found the right lever. Now, his hands swept to the stick.

Just a couple of seconds, he prayed. Just two.

But they were already in the canyon between two pinnacles of basalt. A force beyond his power to control was dragging the ship downward into a black void which suddenly opened at the wide V at the bottom of the gorge.

"COME OUT with your hands up," a voice commanded.

It could have been the same hangar from which the tiny ship had left. Even the uniforms of the men were the same. But there was a difference. A dozen guns pointed their blank faces at him, and he knew those holes could belch tiny pellets into him which would result in bits of flesh and fat and bone flying about. His hands were high above his head as he stepped down from the tiny ladder.

Two of the Fradians clambered into the slender hull of the tiny ship. Presently, they reappeared and stepped smartly before a tall, heavy-built man in a uniform unlike the others. They saluted the tall one.

"Gaga is dead, beaten to death with the butt of a bubble gun. There were two others, but they are no longer in the flesh."

The tall man smiled, and Jack Higgins felt a sudden chill. It was like Death smiling.

"Our Earth friend handled himself well. Alas, in vain. We have the papers Gaga reported he carried." He turned to face the Earthman. "A pity. But I have always maintained Yodar is a fool. Soon we will make a change. He will be a dead fool! Bring the Earthman to my chambers."

The marvels of Yodar's city were as nothing to what Higgins saw in Mitani as they were taking him to Orlando's palace. Now, he was in a deep, comfortable contour chair facing the other. He noted the almost carved features, the dominant chin and nose, the thin, cruel lips and the open look of contempt in the green man's eyes.

Orlando was behind a curved desk on which were scattered the papers the Earthman had been entrusted with. Orlando's fingers tapped the papers. "Not a bad plan. The old man is clever, but his cleverness is really a weakness. He knows we possess the power to win; he is a pacifist, and that is his trouble. I don't know," Orlando's voice trailed off in speculation, then came back at the end of a sigh: "Civil war. Ridiculous! Two days and it would be ended. But perhaps he thought the diversion would be enough. What do you think, Earthman?"

Higgins caught the deep note of amusement in the other's voice. He felt anger rise in his breast, but controlled it quickly. There was a chance although it was faint at best. Bu still, a chance.

"I think Yodar's over-all idea o peace and a settlement of the Fradia

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peoples on Earth is not bad idea."

"I agree with Yodar on the score of settling on your planet," Orlando said. "But peace . . ." He laughed.

"Yodar told me you have weapons so powerful you could destroy the Earth," Higgins used his words with care. "I don't doubt it. Nor that you could be at a safe distance when it happened. But tell me, what would you gain by that?"

"An extreme case," Orlando said. He turned thoughtful. "True, I would gain little except a personal satisfaction. It might take a couple of more light years to find another planet . . . ."

"And perhaps another battle."

"H'm! I see what you mean. I gather you want me to seek peace?"

"Why don't you stop playing games with me?" the Earthman asked. "I can't speak for anyone but myself. Maybe I'm qualified, maybe I'm not. I don't know. But this I do know. There are maybe ten millions of your people doing the fighting. You have five hundred million men against you. They can plaster this tiny planet with thousands of atom bombs. A couple might get into those vents you've made. Boom! That would be the end of your dream."

"And the end of the asteroid, too. It might also mean the end of your planet, my Earth friend."

"We are a strange people," Higgins said. "We value liberty above all else."

"A virtue, but a mistaken one. You think your leaders would risk certain destruction to slavery? Don't answer that; I don't care what the answer is. I am going to do a surprising thing. I am going to allow you to go back to Earth, as Yodar wanted.

"But you will go back with a message from me, not from Yodar. The message is simply this: The capitulation of the Earth's forces, peace at my terms, and the acknowledgment of my rule over your planet. The Earth will have—I will be generous—ten days in which to decide."

The words were forced from Jack Higgins: "You're crazy!"

The thick shoulders heaved in a shrug, but the eyes of Orlando turned icy. "Rodani will fall in two days. Then all of Fradia will be mine. What is more, I will not destroy the Earth, but will destroy all living beings on it. There will be enough room for our twenty millions of people. Perhaps I will not destroy the entire population; perhaps I will leave enough to serve us as slaves. Shortly after your arrival on Earth, I will eliminate every living Earthman on Fradia, as easily and surely as a bubble-gun snuffs out life."

The Earthman did not see him press anything, but a second after he finished talking, two guards appeared in the room from an inner chamber.

"Take him to Gorat," Orlando ordered. He turned to Higgins for the last time. "Your ship is in readiness, with an automatic pilot set to take you back to your planet. Ten days from now, Earthman. Keep it in mind."

GENERAL HAGGERTY paced the length of the office. Grouped about a wide table were the chiefs-of-staff of the Inter-Allied Nations. Jack Haggerty, pale and drawn, stood stiff and straight in the center of the room.

Haggerty, short, wiry, lantern jaw jutting further than usual, stopped his restless pacing. "Damn him! There were sixteen million fighting men up there. Not a single man left. Not one." His voice held a thread of awe.

"Orlando promised their deaths, sir," Higgins said.

"I know, Higgins," the General said. "You tried to warn us. I take the blame on my own shoulders."

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There were murmurs of dissent from the group. The General turned to face them. "The blame is mine. But great as the loss was, we face a greater one. The decision is ours to make. Gentlemen?"

"General Haggerty." A tall, stoop-shouldered man with the stars of a General Of The Army on his collar band, arose and spoke: "There is no decision to make. I think I can speak for all of us. We must fight to the end—"

"Wait!" Jack Higgins broke in. "To the end of what? Stop thinking in terms of soldiers and airmen. The entire Earth is in danger."

"What would you propose, that we hide our heads?" the tall man asked bitingly.

General Haggerty held up his hands for quiet. "We know and appreciate how much you have gone through, the risks you took, and even the knowledge you have of these Fradian scoundrels. But it's unthinkable to give in to their demands."

There was a unanimous chorus of assent.

"I beg the General's pardon, and that of the Council of Military Government," the newsman said. "I did not suggest that. I merely said Orlando's weapons are beyond our comprehension. Now, we no longer have a foothold on Fradia. May I show how such a foothold can be obtained? Orlando has given us ten days, nine now. The ship I flew in on was never sighted, nor was its presence known until I landed. It is the first ship ever taken by the Earth forces. And it is Orlando's first and last mistake. For on that ship is something he forgot about. I suppose because it is commonplace to him.

"On that ship is something called a light-deflector. They paint their ships jet-black and set the deflector up and the ship becomes invisible. How long would it take to make enough of these ships?"

The uniformed men around the table looked at each other. General Haggerty tapped his lips. Then he shook his head. "We don't have enough time, I'm afraid. Nine days... Perhaps a hundred large ships. I'm certain our technicians could untangle the mystery of the light-deflector in very short order. The problem of construction, however, would be too great. Perhaps a hundred ships."

"Well, sir," Higgins said, "we have a good idea, from what I can remember, of where some of the escape vents are. A hundred ships could land a hundred thousand men. Picked men, an army of volunteer suicides. You spoke of a weapon you have just developed. Arm these men with those weapons. They can occupy the attentions of the Fradians until more ships can bring help and supplies. It is a fighting chance."

"The boy is right!" General Haggerty shouted. "By God, he's right!"

"And when the fleet is in readiness, sir," Higgins went on, "I would like to go along. I'd like to be in on the kill."

MYSTERIOUS shadows moved, seemingly without source. They came from a yawning blackness that held no dimension of size, so that it appeared as if the larger darkness was giving birth to hundreds of smaller darknesses.

Jack Higgins stood to one side and watched through the treated glass that was like a band across the material of his head piece. The glass could be looked through only from the inside; from the outside it was as one with the rest of the uniform, a blackness against which light rebounded. He was still filled with the wonder of what had been accomplished by the Earth's scientists in the

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six days which had passed since his arrival on the single-seater ship Orlando had sent him on from Fradia.

He saw the vast shape of the space ship which had carried a thousand men and equipment from the Earth, saw the triple lines of fighting men, each encased in the light-deflecting uniforms, each man carrying a vibration-gun. He turned to the Colonel standing close beside him.

"I guess I'd better take this off, Colonel Mains," he said. "The marker showing the vent is a hundred yards up the flank of that hill. I'll get behind a boulder and slip the uniform off, just in case Orlando has spotters watching for my return."

The Colonel's reply vibrated against his earphones within the head piece: "Very well, Higgins. Now, once more: What is the signal?"

"The removal of the marker. You will know the vent is open and unguarded."

"Very well. Our fleet hovers above and will land the instant we take the bridgehead. Good luck, Higgins, and remember, the fate of the entire expedition is in your hands."

The lean, handsome face of the war correspondent showed a momentary unhappiness, then once more hardened into lines of steel-hard determination. Once more, he was playing the part of bait, but this time of his own choosing.

A kiss... The girl Lydia Grey had kissed him—and his whole life had changed. All the months of being with her and working with her had drawn them closer than he'd realized. Suddenly, it was clear in his mind: She was the sole reason why he was risking his life. Life and living would be empty and without purpose for him, without her. He was in love, unreasonably and desperately in love.

He had turned his profile to the Colonel. Now, he faced the other. "Might as well get to it," he said. "And good luck to you, sir, and the rest."

A wave of the hand, and he was off to the shelter of the boulder behind which he would remove the uniform....

TWO MEN stood close guard on him, their hands on the butts of their bubble-guns. He had thought to be taken directly to Orlando, but instead had been brought to another room. His freedom extended to the four walls. He did not know how long a time had passed since they had brought him to this room, and all his questioning had been answered by shrugging shoulders on the part of the guards.

Suddenly, the door opened and two men marched in.

"Orlando will see the Earthman now," one of them announced.

Jack Higgins studied the cold, cruel face of the man in the chair, and hated him. And with every word that dripped like venom from the thin lips of Orlando, Higgins' hate grew.

"I told you, Earthman, that Yodar's city would fall in short order." He wagged a finger in the Earthman's face. "But you didn't tell me of the woman I would find. Ah! I did not know Earth women were so beautiful. A very pleasant surprise indeed. It caused a change in my plans, you know. My men are weary of fighting. They must have joy in the leisure hours to follow. I think I will exterminate the men of the Earth and leave the women. Not a bad idea. What do you think of it?"

It was as if a red veil fell across Higgins' eyes. The blood rushed to his face and every muscle in his body became taut. He leaned forward across the desk, thrust his face as close to the other's as he could, and shouted: "I think it stinks!"

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Orlando pulled back in shock at the sudden unexpected action. Then, he caught the quick movement of the guards' hands toward the weapons they carried, and his voice rose sharply: "Hold!" Then his head turned slowly to the man before him. "I think it is an excellent idea! And I think also that you are angry because of the woman. But your emotions do not interest me. What is the message you have brought?"

"They agree to your terms, but must sign a formal agreement. My government asks that you grant them another week."

"Not an instant more than the ten days first agreed on," Orlando said. "Before the dawn of the eleventh day, I shall invade. And the forces of the Earth, no matter how many oppose me, will be destroyed as instantly as those who were here."

"They were horrified by what happened here." Higgins' voice was barely above a whisper. "They couldn't imagine a weapon of such power."

"Air, my dear Earth fool! Air compressed into a capsule of metal. So low a temperature as body heat breaks the shell of the inner capsule, expansion follows, and poof!" Orlando spread his hands suddenly and a vision of exploding bodies filled Higgins' mind. "A hail of these capsules fell on the Earthmen, and soon there was only a crimson carpet on the ground to speak of their whereabouts."

"The bubble guns. . ."

"Large and small," Orlando said. "My most powerful weapon. The Earth will be wise to capitulate. I can be magnanimous."

There was a short interval of silence, broken at last by the war correspondent: "Was the girl the only prisoner taken?"

Orlando smiled. "Her friends are also here, as well as Yodar. The final victory would not taste as well if Yodar were not here. Why do you ask?"

"I have a message for the girl from her Uncle. He says—"

"I'll have her brought in." Orlando broke in. He signalled to one of the guards.

It seemed he was gone but a minute. And with him was Lydia Grey. Her eyes went wide at sight of the tall man in the uniform of a war correspondent standing before Orlando, and a tremulous smile broke on her lips.

"Jack! Oh Jack! I never thought to see you again."

There was no one else in the room, so far as Higgins was concerned. Had Orlando told him it would be death to go to her, it would not have stayed the Earthman's feet. For a second, her body was taut against his, then it relaxed and he could feel her strai to him as if she wanted to press herself within him.

"How nice," Orlando said. "But I thought you said her Uncle had a message for her?"

"He has," Higgins whispered into the golden hair pressed against his face. "It's the same as mine. He loves you, and knows everything will turn out well."

She drew her head back and lifted her eyes to look deep within his own. "I guess I've loved you from the first, but I wanted to show you I could take it."

He was still lost in the moment of discovery. She loved him, had loved him from the first. He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned and saw Orlando was behind him. The Fradian was smiling, but the smile extended no further than the lips. Then, something exploded against the side of Higgins' head, and he staggered drunkenly to one side.

"I thought I made it clear the girl is mine," Orlando said. "You did not understand. Explain the fact to him!"

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There were a half dozen guards in the room. They converged on the Earthman who was still swaying from the blow he had received from one of them.

"No!" Lydia Grey screamed. "Please, Orlando..."

"Very well. Throw him in with the others until I need him again."

THE THROBBING at his temple was a minor pain, nothing to the pain and fear he felt at the thought of what might be happening to Lydia at the hands of Orlando. The other men in the room with him could only stare helplessly as he paced from wall to wall in his torment.

It was the Sergeant who took Higgins out of the black mood he was in. "That ain't going to help, fella," he said. "What we gotta do is get out of this place."

"An impossible thing," Yodar's voice was low with despair. "And assuming we did. How would we escape to the upper surface?"

"Give me one of those bubble-guns and I'd manage, somehow, or die in the attempt," Arndt said. He was cold with fury, and his voice shook in the passion of his desire.

Higgins shook his head violently, and motioned them close. "We've got to get topside," he whispered. "There's a whole army of specialists waiting up there. Yodar, do you know anything about this place we're in, the layout of it, and how we can get to the hangar I was brought from?"

"I know Orlando's palace well," Yodar said. "And once we are free, I can get you to the hangar. Getting out of here will be the problem. There must be a thousand men guarding the palace."

"Cripes! Maybe we can set fire to the joint," Sergeant Byrnes sounded his disgust.

"That's the big deal our boys have. Fire. You can't extinguish it, can't drown it, can't do anything until it burns to nothing whatever is in its way. A new discovery our technicians have made. But how the hell can we get our men down here?"

"You mean they're up there waiting?" Captain Arndt demanded.

"Yep. Waiting for my signal," Higgins said.

"Then all we've got to worry about is getting you and Miss Grey to the surface," Arndt said.

Higgins curled his lip and narrowed his eyes. "Guess I misjudged you, Captain. By the same token you're misjudging me. We all leave together, if you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Yodar said, marking each word with a stroke of one finger. "I think I have the answer to our difficulty. Orlando! If we could persuade him to go along, preferably at gun point, the guards would not dare shoot."

"But how?" the Captain demanded.

Suddenly, Higgins pounded a fist into a palm. "There's been too much talk. Action's what we want. This is an old gag, but maybe they've never used it on Fradia. The sick prisoner gag." He bent double, and contorted his face into an expression of intense pain. To make it more real, he stuck a finger down his throat.

What followed would have fooled the cleverest of men, for there was no faking that.

Byrnes ran to the door and began to pound at it with his fist. Presently, a voice demanded they step back and, immediately after, the door opened to let four uniformed guards step in.

"What's wrong?" one of them demanded.

"This man! Can't you see he's ill? Orlando wouldn't want him to die," Yodar said.

"Keep quiet, old fool," the squad

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leader ordered. "The three of you march to the wall and face it while I look at this one. Men, keep a close watch on them."

The Earthman was lying with eyes closed, hands clasped over his middle, moving now and then and moaning as he did.

The Fradian bent over the other. "What's wrong?"

"My belly! It's on fire!" Higgins moaned. He rolled so that he was facing the green man.

"Take your damned hands away," the guard said as he put a hand down to touch the other.

"I will," Higgins said. His voice no longer held agony. And before the other could guess Higgins' intention, it was too late.

With a lightning-like move, Higgins reached out and grasped the extended wrist and pulled downward, at the same time rolling inward, thus throwing the green man off balance. In a second, the bubble-gun which had been held loosely by the green man had been transferred to Higgins' right fist. There were four popping sounds. The green men didn't stand a chance....

"NOW WE'VE got weapons," the newsman said exultantly. "As I remember, we're just down the corridor from Orlando's room."

"That's right," Yodar said. "But the corridor's lined with guards."

"Let's make that past tense," Higgins suggested. "We open the door and start blasting. How many shells does this thing hold?"

"Ten capsules," Yodar said.

"I used four of mine. So we've got thirty-six left. Well?"

"Let's go," Captain Arndt said. He turned to look at the other two, about-faced to Higgins and started for the corridor.

It might have been another story. But surprise was on their side. Before the corridor guards could more than register surprise and shout the alarm, they had won through to Orlando's very door. Higgins was the first in.

Lydia Grey was bent backward across the desk. Orlando, his face a mask of sensuous desire, was ripping the clothes from the girl. Already she was bare to the waist, and as he tore, he pressed close to her in his desire, and mouthed her lips with his foul kisses.

He was so lost in his passionate frenzy, he did not even hear the door opening. The first he knew of the four who escaped was when Jack Higgins whirled him away from the girl and crashed a right hand into his mouth. Orlando stumbled backward, spitting blood and teeth. The desk stopped him. And once more Higgins was on the green man. Three times Orlando went down under the hammer blows of the Earthman. And when he didn't come up for the fourth time, Higgins raised his foot to drive his heel into the battered, pulpy face.

"Wait! We need him!" Captain Arndt threw his arms about Higgins and lifted him bodily. "You can finish this upstairs!"

"I'm okay now," Higgins gasped. "Where's Lydia?"

Her hands were crossed before her to cover her nakedness. "I'm all right, darling," she said. She sounded weak. "Mind tossing me your shirt? I might catch cold running around this way."

He unbuttoned his blouse and spread it around her. Her lips puckered for a kiss. "Just one before we try for the outside," she said.

It was the shortest, sweetest kiss he had ever known.

Then, her hands were shoving him away and her voice saying: "I'm all right now. Really I am. But we've wasted enough time. I imagine you've

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aroused the whole palace."

Higgins patted her shoulder and moved away to confront Orlando. "We're going to get to the surface," he said as he shoved his face into the bloody one of the green man, "and you're going to help us. And if you've any idea of playing hero, that's all right with me. I'm itching to put one of these air capsules into you."

The green skin became mottled. "No!" Orlando whispered. "You wouldn't."

"Try me and see. Now, all you've got to do is yell to your men to hold their fire. First one lets loose, so do I. Understand?"

"THIS ELEVATOR, like all the others to the surface, can be operated at both ends. If all of us go up, they can stop us from coming down. One of us, and Orlando, will have to stay below."

They listened in taut silence to Yodar. It was a tough problem.

"Might as well be me," Byrnes said. "How about it, Captain Arndt?"

"Well..." the Captain hesitated.

"Higgins can't stay. He's got to give the signal. The girl—"

"All of you go," Yodar broke in. "I'm an old man and I have too little to live for. Orlando is frightened of you, but his real fear is terror of what I could do to him, and will, if he attempts anything at all out of the way. I will guard him well, do not fear."

The men solemnly shook hands with the old man, and just before they stepped into the elevator, Lydia planted a kiss on the smooth green cheeks.

"You'll like the Earth," she said.

JACK HIGGINS was the first one out of the elevator when it returned from the surface with the first huge containers and fifty fighting men on it. And beside him was Sergeant Byrnes and Captain Arndt. The vast hangar was empty.

"Yodar! Yodar, where are you?" Higgins called.

From beside the huge trapdoor which opened to the cage coming from the ground, came a weak reply: "Here, Earthman. Here..."

"What happened?" Arndt asked, as they bent over the old man.

"Orlando got...away. Shot me. My legs gone...and soon I die. Hurry before it is...too late..."

"How long do we have?" Higgins asked.

"Don't know. Do not delay. Hur-ry..." the voice faded and died. And as the voice died, so did the rest of him.

"We may not have time," Higgins whirled on the others. "I've got to chance something."

He dashed to the nearest fighting man. "Let me have your fire tank."

The man stared blankly at him.

"Give him the tank," Captain Arndt commanded.

"WHAT SHOULD I tell Lydia?" Captain Arndt asked, as he waited with Higgins for the elevator to come up.

"Tell her I'll be back," Higgins replied, smilingly. The smile faded. "Just tell her I had to do it. I forgot an important thing. There are women and children down here, as well as on our own planet. It wouldn't be right not to try and give them a chance."

"You're a fool, but a hell of a brave one," Arndt said. "Don't give Orlando a chance. Blast him for all of us."

"I will. Sounds like my boat's in. Well, be seeing you."

Then he was alone in the elevator. Presently, the hum died. The doors opened and the moving platform rolled smoothly before him. He held

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the nozzle tightly and stepped onto the platform. It was deserted. He looked down at his feet and saw a faint shadow. A tight smile parted his lips. He knew he and his equipment were invisible; he had hurriedly donned the suit of light-deflecting material at the last minute.

The faint shadow was the only visible sign of his presence.

Years of training had given him a quick sense of direction orientation. The platform moved swiftly forward and, as it moved, Higgins sent quick glances to right and left seeking the enemy. He had forgotten to ask Yodar how long a time had passed since Orlando's escape. But it couldn't have been long.

Then, the huge shape of Orlando's palace came into view, and also an immense army lined up before the palace, and stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see. Higgins' left hand went out to a stop button and pressed it home. The platform stopped with efficient silence. He squeezed the tiny bulb which set his miniature audio into operation.

"Men of Fradia!" his voice boomed out. He was too high up to see their faces, but he knew his voice had reached them. "You can't see me, but I am here nevertheless. I come with a message for the people of Fradia..."

He saw the palace gates swing wide and a second later, Orlando, attended by several score of his personal guards, marched out.

"Don't let Orlando lead you to destruction. Think of your families, your homes, your future. The peoples of the Earth want you to come and live with them in peace. There has been enough of war."

He stopped when he saw several men gather close to Orlando. Immediately after, these men ran forward to the front of the first line of men. He guessed what their orders were.

"Stop!" his voice reached the farthest ranks. "Watch!"

Flame compressed into a thin stream, flame which could be thrown a thousand yards even from the hand equipment he wore, shot out in an invisible stream toward the palace. The rain of flame struck the solid masonry and melted it instantly. Seconds later, the huge building gave voice to a shriek that was almost human as it began a slow collapse.

"There are a million of us above, ready to come below!" Higgins continued. "I am one man and see what I can do alone, and do without fear of reprisal. Think of what will happen when a million men invade...."

He had seen the men before the palace break and run as the building began to fall, nor was Orlando the last to run. He could also see the solid ranks waver, as if an unheard command had reached their minds. He knew he had to strike again, at least once more.

"Yodar was right! This war is foolish. Throw down your arms, take Orlando prisoner, and peace is yours. Otherwise...."

But Orlando was to have one last say, one last fling. He ran forward as the grey dust of the collapsed building settled, until he was facing his men. His voice came faintly to Higgins: "He is somewhere on the platform above. Shoot him down!"

This time, Higgins aimed the spray directly above the spot where Orlando stood. He had no conception of the tremendous power and scope of the flame thrower. There was no place to run, no place to hide. Invisible flaming death struck in millions of fiery droplets. But as if he was immune to it, Orlando was still upright when Higgins closed the nozzle.

"Now you have seen!" Higgins' voice boomed at them again. "Even

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if you kill me, you know now that ten men, men you cannot see, men who have the power to exterminate all of you, can do so without your being able to fight back. And there are a million of them above. You can do nothing to stop them from coming below because they control the vents!"

It was impossible to see the effect of his words; there were too many of them below. He thought quickly. One last demonstration might do the trick. Not more than twenty yards from him was a slanted level leading into the square before the palace. He broke into a run.

PRESENTLY he was on the street, moving forward slowly. Now, he could see the green faces before him, see the indecision and fear on them. But discipline was still strong. Commanding officers were shouting tersely for them to fire into the structure above, and their cumulative orders brought a semblance of military order to the massed ranks. Higgins saw a forest of tube-like weapons raised skyward, and seconds later there was a thunder of sound as the Fradians loosed a barrage against the platform.

The platform vanished for hundreds of feet along its length.

Now, Higgins saw Orlando step forward, his evil face raised up. "That is our answer to their demands," he raised a threatening arm. "Let them come, and even though we can't see them, they will know how useless their invisibility is."

Higgins shuddered at the terrible concerted scream of agony he heard as he loosed another stream of death. He aimed it upward at an angle, and when the fiery drops fell, there was no one to tell the direction from which the fire came.

But he knew he had failed. It was simply impossible to make himself heard by all. More, there was a limit to the fuel held by his tank. He had to get out and away. But where? Already squads of men had detached themselves from the fore companies and were stealing forward and to the sides, blasting away with their weapons as they came.

Seconds counted now. And Jack Higgins knew he had lost....

Suddenly, thunder filled the air. It was all about him, the vast sound of a voice. It spoke in understandable accents: "Hold, men of Fradia! Hold your fire. You cannot see us and we are all about you...."

And Jack Higgins knew what had happened. The other ships had landed, had found the vents, and now hundreds of tiny two-men ships were flying around up there, probably close to the ceiling. Invisible ships, ships armed with great tanks of the liquid fire, ships capable of exterminating the entire Fradian army, just as he had threatened.

"Surrender or die!" the unseen voice demanded.

Then, Jack saw Orlando. He was in the midst of a group of his officers. The group was moving away from the main body of the troops lined up before the palace, and toward several ships by the side of a building. Like a flash, he was after them. Something told him he had to reach them before they got to the ships. He was only a couple of yards off when the first ship was reached.

Skidding to a halt, he aimed the nozzle at the ship. A second later, it dissipated into nothing under the hail of invisible fire. He knew the men in the ships above had eyes only for the main body of Orlando's army, and would not pay too much attention to the movement of a few men.

He heard the command given by one of the officers to fire in every direction at will. The air became acrid

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with the odor of tube fire. But now there were only two ships to get. Then only one.

Suddenly, something struck him. The world fell apart in a million stars, each like a comet trailing a fiery trail. Somehow, he managed through sheer will power to get to his feet. He pressed the nozzle trigger.

Nothing happened.

He realized instantly that the shot which had struck him had hit the tank somewhere and had fused the connection of the metal hose into the nozzle. Had the projectile struck anywhere else, he would have died in a fiery bath. He was alive—but weaponless.

And Orlando and a half dozen of his men were already at the ship.

HE WAS like an invisible human torpedo flying through the air. His wild tackle caught Orlando behind the Fradian's knees and the man fell as though he had been hit by a sledge. Jack could see Orlando's face; it was like something out of Hell.

Orlando's voice screamed: "Get the ship off the ground. Quick...."

Jack's hand strangled the rest.

The officers seemed spellbound by what they saw. Orlando was clutching his throat and kicking helplessly about, as though he were trying to commit suicide by strangling himself. Their eyes widened at what followed. Orlando was lifted straight up in the air, held there for an instant, then dashed to the ground.

It was too much for them. They broke and fled.

And as they fled, so did the nearest group. It became a plague. Company after company found itself embroiled in the same fear. Weapons clattered to the ground; thousands of men stood stock-still with upraised hands. While from above, the metallic voice called directions and order into the chaos below.

But there was one who heard nothing of this. His tongue protruded blackly between purple twisted lips, and his eyeballs seemed to be forced from their sockets. His hands were clutched around his own throat, as if he had strangled himself.

And above the dead figure of Orlando, Jack Higgins stood, an invisible avenging being....

THE END

(*Concluded from page 47*)

arm come up with a gun.

Allison flung the ax. A shot and the crash of metal rang together. Sasho came on, his big frame lunged. Allison doubled his fist and swung as hard as he could. He struck a head that was as solid as stone.

Two things Allison saw in that fleeting moment. One was the glint of red reflected in Sasho's blazing eyes. The battering ram was coming back!

The other was Sasho's suffocating gasp for breath. The air was leaving rapidly through the smashed portholes. The aides made a dash for space helmets—

JUNE jumped. Allison followed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the others were coming too.

For the first time it flicked through his consciousness that he and June were the only ones with parachutes!

A few yards apart they fell, Lester Allison and June O'Neil. Looking back they caught a glimpse of one of the world's rarest pictures—a picture they would remember as long as they lived.

A battering ram, streaking brilliant red through space, smashed squarely through the nose of the majestic S-37 as if it were nothing—a climaxing blow that spelled the end of an Empire!

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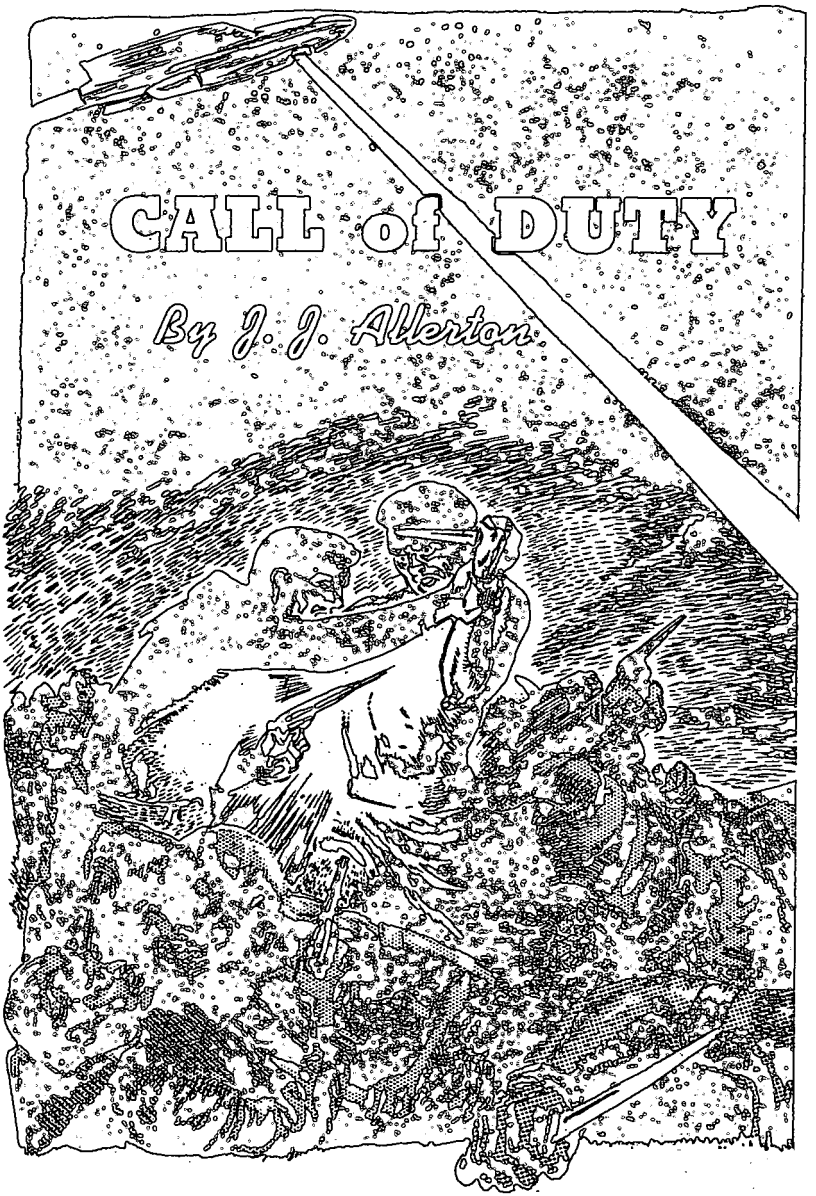

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Weller had his own definition for duty; but there are times in a man's life when right uncompromisingly takes the wrong way 'round . . .

"DAMN IT, 'Bull', you can't do it! Larry's your brother."

Ed 'Bull' Weller suddenly shot erect, his shoulders hunched, his eyes glowering, his brows, thick as soot across the wide bridge of his nose, meeting. Bull Weller was a sight to see when he stood straight. Six and a half feet tall, he weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty pounds, all of it bone and muscle. Tom Berthold backed away a couple of steps in alarm. Sometimes it didn't take much for Bull to use his fists on a man. Certainly less than Berthold had said.

"I don't have a brother; I don't have friends; I don't have anything on my mind but duty! Get it? Duty! I was told what to do and it's my duty to do it. That's why they gave me the '*Star Queen*'. Because Bull Weller's the kind of guy who gets done what they want. And nobody stands in his way. As for Larry, he of all men, should know how I feel. And since he acted the way he did he's going to be man enough to take the consequences."

"It's broken bigger men than Larry," Berthold said, his shoulders heaving in a faint shrug.

"He'll have to chance it, then!" Bull said. "And let me tell you something, mister. Another riot like the men put on the other night and

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I'll restrict them to quarters for a week, and *you* for a month. So keep 'em in line."

Sheer anger blinded Berthold. Otherwise he would never have permitted himself to say what he did: "Bull! Listen! You'll go Venus-mad if you don't watch it. Larry's a good kid, and a smart one. He knows what the score is out here...."

"Yeah! A dame. A green-haired Venus dame from a *kilo* dive. So he gets into a fight over her. And kills a man. Why the dumb punk could have wrecked the whole operation. Doesn't he know I'm doing my best to get these crazy baboons in line and keep them there? I had to pay out nine bottles of booze to the headman because of that killing. Lucky for Larry the guy was a trouble-maker anyway. But Larry'll have to take the rap."

Berthold's lips tightened. He saluted smartly and did an about-face and stepped from the room. Weller sank back into his chair with a sign of intense weariness. His right hand went toward the top drawer in a subconscious desire. The bottle of Venusian *kilo* reposed within. He looked at his hand, eyes suddenly wide, as if realizing the hand's intent, and shoved it into his pocket.

Kilo, that fragrant, easy-to-down Venusian liquid. How smoothly it went down, how swiftly the effects took hold. It was against the law to take it back to Earth. It was said of the stuff that once a man drank it he would kill to get hold of more...

"Damn this heat!" Weller muttered and stepped to the window overlooking the landing field. His breath came fast as he looked to the spot where the *Star Queen* lay snuggly at anchor. "Aah, you beauty," he spoke aloud. "And guys like Berthold want me to forget duty. Why, that's how I got you. That's why they gave you to me, to make this trip. Because I have never failed in my duty." He sighed again and moved to the opposite window. A heavy frown settled over his brow as he looked over the scene spread before him. A vast pit, several miles in diameter had been dug in the earth. It was fairly shallow but would grow in depth as the gigantic digging machines would settle into their work. Immense lights, set on portable carriers, made day out of the night and showed thousands of workers busy at their tasks. Weller wiped the sweat which suddenly poured from his forehead and slipped an anti-heat capsule from his pocket and swallowed it.

"Damn this heat!" he muttered again. There was no need to look at the room thermometer. It would read between eighty-eight and ninety. That was as low as they allowed the air-conditioning to go. Lower and the difference between the outside and inside temperatures would prove too much. Men would sicken of heat fatigue and would be useless for weeks. The anti-heat capsules did an effective job, replacing on the instant all salts lost from the body, and besides, supplying a store of energy to it. The men were supposed to take two capsules in a twelve-hour period. The trouble was the men took one on arising and the other some eight hours later, when they went off duty. The energy in one of the capsules allowed them a night of fun they couldn't take otherwise.

THE THOUGHT of fun brought Larry to his brother's mind. Bull wondered what had gotten into his brother. After all, Larry was a Second-Commander, not some petty Ensign, newly-commissioned. Furthermore, Larry had gone through

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Air-Annapolis, the toughest school in the world. Duty should be a part of him, as the skin is, not something like a suit of clothes, to be worn only for some occasions.

He thought of the girl Larry had fought over. Pretty enough. Maybe stronger words would be better. Sensuous enough, provocative enough, made for loving and ready for it, Weller thought. But a *kilo* dive girl. What the hell! Let the dames alone until a man gets back. That way there's no trouble.

He turned at the sudden knock at the door. He roared for whoever was on the other side to come in. His eyes went wide, then narrowed into speculative slits at sight of the tall, almost nude man who stepped across the threshold.

"Leepa! What do you want?"

Leepa brought his palms to his eyes, his lips and then let his hands fall limply to his sides, before replying:

"Earthman! My children complain. The work is too hard. They say they are driven without letup, that they do not have time even to eat—"

Weller placed his huge fists on his hips and looked at the Venusian for a long moment. This was not new to him. Leepa was headman of a very large tribe. He supplied all the workmen on the project. The trouble was, Weller thought, they were Venusians. Lazy, undependable, shiftless, without responsibility, the men were a problem. But Leepa was their leader and when he told them to work they did.

"Did I not tell you," Weller explained in Leepa's dialect, "that I will need your men only until the depth is reached where the machines can take over?"

"Yes," Leepa said, "the Earthman did. But he did not say what that depth is."

That point, Weller realized, was going to be hard to explain. For it could be at fifty feet, five hundred or five thousand. Only the Hagel Counter could tell. Hagelium, the most precious metal in all the Universe, was found only on Venus. The genius of Earth's scientists had invented and manufactured the complex and huge machines they would use when the metal would be found. Machines which could in a single operation, tear away all the base metals, refine the Hagelium down until it was in a pure state, and press it into small bricks ready for processing. Fine leaf would be pared from those bricks and placed in the barrels of the huge heat-rifles used on air cruisers and destroyers. Hagelium had proven to be the only metal which would not melt under the terrific heat given off in the firing of the rifles.

And that was Weller's job. To bring back a ton of the metal. He had three months in which to do the job. A month had already gone by and the Hagel counter had as yet not showed any signs that the metal was at hand.

"Do I not pay your men well?" Weller said. "Nor do I complain when one or more of them do not come to work because they had too much *kilo* the night before."

"True. The Earthman speaks the truth. He does not complain. He has them lashed ten times for the first offense, and fifty for each following. But that is to be expected. It is the matter of hours and food—"

WELLER suddenly smiled. Leepa had wetted his lips with his tongue. The devil had come for whiskey, and for nothing else. But an excuse had to be used for the interview....

Weller moved over to the desk,

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opened the lowest drawer on the left and pulled two bottles of whiskey from it. He handed them to the Venusian and said:

"Here. A gift. To show how much the Earthman appreciates Leepa's good work in his behalf."

"The Earthman is kind," Leepa said, going through the ceremony of the palms to the eyes, lips and sides. Then he backed out.

Weller fell into the chair and leaned back. And after a moment his hand went to the drawer where the *Kilo* lay. And this time he did not draw it back. The swallow he took out of the gourd took half the contents from it. It was so easy to drink. And the feeling a man got from it was so fine, so *right*....

The guard saluted smartly, did a right face and marched ahead of the two senior officers of the *Star Queen*. He opened the barred gate to the pen, stepped back and did a left face and let his rifle come to rest.

The slender man who had been standing pressed against the bars stepped out and came to attention at sight of Berthold and Bull Weller. There was a ten-day growth of beard on Larry Weller's face, yet the sensitive features seemed even more so. Only the eyes were hard, blazing in anger.

"All right, Larry," his brother said. "At ease. Now I hope this has taught you a lesson. You can go back to quarters and shave and dress up. Take the afternoon off; do what you want. I won't say anything. Just stay away from the *kilo* joint!"

Larry saluted about faced and started off. He had said nothing to his brother. Suddenly he turned and marched back to the two men. Once more he came to attention.

"Sir," he said to Bull. "I don't know what lesson I was supposed to learn in that hell-hole. But I can tell you what I learned. That a man can get all twisted up, so badly he starts to fall to pieces."

"What did he mean by that, Tom?" Weller asked as they started off on their inspection of work progress at the pit.

"Gets pretty hot in that compound," Berthold said. "Sun beating down on that tin roof, and when it rains, well, you know what a Venusian rain's like.... Guess Larry's a bit knocked out from ten days of it."

"Oh, hell! Let's stop coddling Larry. I know you like him. But damn it! He's no child. Time he learned responsibility. Now enough of Larry and let's get on with the inspection...."

Berthold's lined, middle-aged features settled into lines of repressed anger. Bull was getting harder and harder to get along with. This job was a tough one, Berthold admitted to himself, but there was no reason to take it out on everyone. This business of inspection.. His lips thinned in a sour grin. Damn! Nothing but an excuse to watch the men get lashed....

THE *KILO* joint was in full swing. *Star Queen* were awaiting them at the pit. It didn't seem much deeper, since Larry had been imprisoned, ten days before. Bull moved away from Berthold, stood at the lip of the huge excavation and looked across to the far side. There was an inscrutable look on his face. He turned abruptly, marched back to the inspection line and in the company of Berthold did his inspection. He was more rigid than ever, this afternoon. Anger blazed in many eyes at the amount of punishment Bull dealt out. But their real anger was at the fact that Weller had called for an inspection in the afternoon,

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when the heat was almost intolerable and sweating made it impossible to present a neatness of appearance.

Inspection of the men over, Bull went down into the lip where the officer in charge was awaiting him. Rank on rank of Venusian worker squatted on the ground. Armed guards patrolled the area, watchful for trouble. The Venusians did not carry arms. But most of them carried a curved and sharp jungle knife. It was as necessary to them as their hands, and more useful.

The officer read from a list of petty insubordinations and work failures. And as the man's number was called Bull would issue a punishment, so many lashes, so many days in the laborers compound. Then the punishment detail was called and the first of the lashings began.

Berthold stood the whip of the steel-tipped lash as long as he could and asked to be excused. But Bull Weller stayed to the very end. For as the executive officer it was his duty to remain and see to it punishment was meeted out.

He didn't seem to notice the bloody men lying on the ground before him in the punishment area. But Bull's nostrils were dilated and tiny sparks lay deep in the brown eyes. Damn natives, he thought as he started back. Teach them to behave, he would. And he was getting a bit fed up on Leepa and his leeching. How much of the damned whiskey could he consume? Leepa had better watch his step from now on or he too would feel the steel-tipped thongs.

He heard the barked orders to return to work as he passed the last of the guards and climbed back to the surface. The men and officers had broken ranks and were either going off-duty or on. Bull looked toward Venustown in the growing dusk, and felt a sudden urge for something. Maybe a change of scene might do him good, he thought. Getting stale. Office and quarters, office and quarters. A man could go bats that way. Maybe Berthold was right.

Better go back and change to civies. Wouldn't do to see the exec. officer in town in uniform. Bad impression on the natives....

THE *KILO* joint was in full swing. The battered juke box of a previous century, the relic of one of the early visits of a first freighter to Venus, was grinding out a tune. Men stood at the bar, three deep, natives in loin clothes, sailors from the *Star Queen,* in fatigue shorts, officers in undress and *kilo* girls, the Venusian equivalent of a bar hostess.

Bull Weller parted the beaded curtains which served for a door and passed over the threshold. His piercing glance saw the table at which Berthold and two other officers were seated. Bull stepped forward, shoving his way through the dancers and receiving dirty looks until they recognized him. Then they stopped dancing for an instant and looked at him in wonder. For this was the first time the chief had ever been seen in a *kilo* joint.

One of the officers with Berthold said something in an aside to him and Berthold looked quickly toward Bull. He arose and waited his chief's arrival.

"Aah, sit down!" Bull growled. "Just keep doing what you were. I thought I'd get away from that damned operation. The sight of the pit was getting me down. At ease, gentlemen, at ease—"

He looked at the small glasses in which a green liquid, murky as turgid waters, and heavy as oil, floated. *Kilo.* He swallowed quickly and

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turned away to look at the dancers.

"Drink, Ed?" Berthold asked.

"*Kilo?*" Weller asked in apparent disinterest.

"Yeah. *Kilo—*"

"Nah. Tried it the first time I was here. Can't stomach the stuff. I'll order whiskey. At least it's a man's drink."

Weller turned to survey the dancers again and found himself looking into a pair of hazel eyes, slanted and provoking. Tawney skin contrasted with hair green as jungle grass. The girl wore a skimy halter which only served to accent the swelling breasts. A colored skirt, worn at an angle and cut off well above the knees, showed her slender curving legs and thighs in all their sculptured perfection. She held a glass of *kilo* in her left hand and placed her right hand on the table as she bent toward Bull.

He caught his breath at the sudden sight of the almost exposed breasts.

"You do not remember Neela?" she asked.

She spoke in English and fairly well. Bull shook his head. "Why? Am I supposed to?" he grunted.

She laughed and bent even closer. "Ha-ha! The Earthman jokes. 'Ten lashes!' Neela remembers. It is hard to forget ten lashes. And only because I was drinking with your brother. But with you, bah! This is for you!" The contents of the glass spilled over the hairy chest and ran down into the white fatigues Weller wore.

But before the others could get around the table Weller stopped them with uplifted hand. There was a wide smile on the man's lips. Only Berthold guessed at the wild anger which seethed beneath the surface.

"Yes," Weller said. "Now I remember. You were the girl about whom my brother fought and killed a man. Yes. I had them give you ten lashes. I see I made a mistake. Should have had them give you fifty—"

Her hand moved with lightning-speed behind her. But before it could bring out the slim blade concealed in a scabbard at the waist in the rear, Bull Weller had imprisoned the small hand. He had to move swiftly but fortunately he didn't have the table to contend with. He held the hand prisoner, twisted behind her, and grinned into her eyes. And suddenly Neela was moving sensuously against him, straining her body to his, pressing her breasts against the hairy chest.

Weller went pale through the tan and mouthing an oath, he shoved her away. She went spinning onto the floor to fall in a heap in a far corner. For an instant the tableaux held. Then one of the other girls giggled in laughter, another took it up and then the room rocked with it.

Neela got to her feet and stepped through the beaded curtains. And what might have been trouble disappeared in laughter....

Weller was sweating through every pore as he slid his chair out and fell into it. A girl came over for their order and Weller said; "*Kilo.*"

The others looked at him in stunned silence.

"Damn!" Weller exploded. "I meant whiskey. And the rougher the better. Quick, damn you!"

The girl turned and scurried to the bar.

"Native trash!" Weller said after downing the whiskey neat. "I'll be damned glad when we get back. It'll be good to see an Earthwoman again."

"Here's to it," Berthold said, holding his glass up.

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"Hold it!" Weller said. "If it's toasts we'll be making, then let's have some bottles up here."

BERTHOLD mumbled a good-night and staggered toward his quarters. Weller, sober though he had consumed two quarts of whiskey, watched the other depart, then stepped into his own room. The instant the door closed he knew he was not alone. The light switch was head high at his right hand. He flicked it up, bent low and leaped to one side....

Laughter trickled toward him as he slowly straightened. Seated on his bunk, the bottle of *kilo* cuddled against her breast, sat Neela.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. "And give me that bottle!"

He snatched it from her fingers and she laughed again at the expression on his face. "I thought you might be lonesome," she said lightly. "And it is always better to drink *kilo* with someone you like. No?"

"No!" I don't like you, for one thing, and I don't drink this slop for another. So get out of here and off the base before I have you thrown into the laborer's compound for the night. Beat it!"

"You are foolish," she said, as she moved sinuously toward him. "Neela knows. The look of *kilo* is already in your eyes. And Neela is warm, warmer than the dried-out Earth-women she has seen from the tourist ships."

He took hold of her arm roughly, started to drag her toward the door and found that she had turned herself toward him and was pressed against him now. The blood suddenly was pounding in his veins and the room was unbearably hot and the fragrance of her was overwhelming.

He shook himself free and pulled her to the door. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness as she flipped the light switch down. And though his hand was on the knob he did not open it. Nor did he draw away when she pulled him toward the bunk....

Two more weeks passed. Two-thirds of the allotted time had almost gone. And still the Hagel counter showed a blank. Bull Weller was almost constantly on *kilo*, and the girl, Neela, was an every night visitor. More and more lashings were resorted to, to keep the laborers on the job. And Leepa was never sober anymore.

Weller sat in his shorts and fingered the message just handed him. It was brief and to the point, just like the others had been. It asked, or rather demanded, to know what was happening. He crushed the piece of paper and hurled it in a corner and sat and glowered. Then he pulled the gourd of *kilo* from its receptacle and drank the contents in a single swallow.

It never failed to give him the lift he needed. But now it worked in another way, also. It deadened his sharpness of action and thought, made him a little lethargic....

The door opened and Berthold, in the company of Larry Weller entered. There was a worried look on the second's face. Larry's sensitive features seemed carved of marble, so immobile were they.

"I—I was worried," Berthold said. "I—"

"Why the hell don't you knock?" Bull snarled.

"I did, sir," Berthold flushed at the words.

"You did? With what, tissue?"

"Sir," Larry broke in. "You ordered punishment detail today."

"Yeah! Yeah. So I did. Well. Let's get on with it."

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THE NUMBER of those to be disciplined was fantastic. The slightest lack of effort was enough to warrant ten lashes. Fifty were common punishment and of late Bull had raised the number for severe discipline to seventy-five. Almost without exception the entire seamen body of the *Star Queen* were on armed duty as guards.

Their eyes mirrored resentment as they watched his slovenly figure approach. But he had eyes only for the whip in the hands of the disciplining officer. The list of offenders and their deeds was long. And suddenly the heat made itself felt. Anger curled into open flame in Bull Weller's breast.

"Ta hell with it!" he suddenly shouted. "Who's next on the list?"

The officer read the next number and an elderly native stepped forward. Silence greeted his move. It was obvious to all the others something was amiss. Only Bull Weller could not sense it.

"So-o? Loafing on the job, eh? Well. I'll teach you, personally, why you shouldn't do it again. Give me the lash, Ensign."

The old man faced Bull, not a sign of fear on his rather handsome features. "'Tis not meet that such as you should punish one as I," the old man said. "Punishment should be given by small men."

It was a rebuke which made the faces of all those listening go red. But Bull was fingering the steel-tipped whip with ill-repressed desire. He was deaf to the old man's words. He knew only that *he* was going to do the whipping today....

The old man held up until the thirtieth stroke. Then he fell to the ground, too spent to do more than moan. Blood streamed from the gaunt body in a crimson tide.

"Get up, damn you!" Bull Weller shouted in a wild frenzy. "I ain't through!"

"You'll kill him, you fool!" Berthold suddenly stepped in front of Weller. "Those natives'll run amok any second."

Weller whirled, shot a chopping right to Berthold's jaw, and snarled, "Arrest this man. Arrest him, I say "

Berthold recovered from the blow, stood stiff and straight while the Ensign approached. The side of his jaw was already purpling.

"I'll take it all the way to headquarters," Berthold said softly.

"Maybe," Weller said, suddenly sobering. "And maybe not." He turned suddenly morose, as though conscious of his fall from grace. His action had been uncalled for. Yet he found it impossible to retreat from the position he had left himself in. His was not a compromising nature. "All right. Dismissed—"

BULL WELLER paced the room with the frenzy of an animal. The last of the *kilo* he possessed had been used a few moments before. It was too early for Neela to come. She had become his source of supply. To hell with her, he decided of a sudden. She got it from the *kilo* joint she worked at, anyway. He could get it there, also. He searched his pockets for money. Nothing. He remembered then that he had given the last of it to Neela for the purchase of the last gourd of *kilo*.

So they'll give it to me for nothing, a good customer like me, he thought. And if they don't, I'll just take it, that's all. And I'd like to see the one'd stop Bull Weller....

Ordinary seamen passed him as he hurried along. They grinned as he passed, not even noticing their sloppy salutes. Nor did he hear their sudden talk about, "—*Kilo*-happy Weller—"

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Weller had but one thought in mind, the drug-like drink....

The *kilo*-joint was alive and brimming over with business. A freighter had docked that morning and the merchant seamen were off duty. The first place they had headed for was the *kilo*-joint. Weller swept aside the tinkling beads and peered through bloodshot eyes at the now-familiar scene. Several of the men were wrestling in play with some of the serving girls. The noise was deafening with the shouts of men and the squeal of women and the constant grind of the ancient juke box.

Bull shouldered his way to the bar. The native bartender came over, eyes clouded in half-anger, half-fear.

"A bottle of *kilo!*" Bull grunted.

The native turned and took one from the shelf and placed it in front of Bull. Bull grabbed it, pried the cork off and swallowed a full half of it.

"—The money, please," the native said.

"Money? Navy doesn't need money," Bull said as he started to leave. "Not me, anyway."

"No? And who the hell are you? And what navy you belong to?" a thick-set man with truculent eyes asked thickly as his heavy hand fell on Bull's shoulders. "Pay the man, 'fore I take it outa your hide."

Weller placed the gourd carefully on the bar, pivoted sharply and swung. The blow knocked the other in a heap. But he didn't stay on the floor long. Blood streamed from a pulped mouth as the man lowered his head and came in swinging with both hands.

Bull took a couple of punches, suddenly bent and grabbed the other about the waist and lifted him high, hurled him across the room. Silence had fallen the instant the fight had started. But as the sailor's body went sliding across the room, bowling over a couple of drunken dancers in its wake, bedlam broke loose. A half dozen men rushed Bull, and at the same time a general melee broke out.

Bull roared in sheer glee. A free-for-all, something he hadn't been in for years was taking place. For the first time all thoughts of *kilo,* all thoughts of Neela left him. A fight, the feel of flesh being smashed, of men tumbling to the floor under the sledge-hammer blows of his mighty muscles, that was the life.

HE LEAPED forward, swinging with both hands, powerful blows which knocked a man down to stay. But he wasn't the Bull Weller of old. *Kilo* had taken its toll of him. His sharpness was gone and even some of the power. He swung with his weight alone, now. It was enough for a while. Then as more and more men came to him, and he had to contend with three and sometimes four at a time, he found himself gasping for breath, taking more punishment than he was giving.

As usual, the natives stayed out of the fight. It could mean a death sentence to get caught in one. But now, as if conscious of Bull Weller's weakness, some of them edged into the fight. And their way of fighting was with the razor-sharp jungle knife.

But though Bull's strength and speed was not of old, his brain still functioned with speed and clarity. He realized he was going to get a terrific shellacking. He had been fighting in the open. Suddenly, he lifted one of those trying to get in at him and swung him as one swings a club. The others fell beneath the swinging body of the one in Bull's hands. Then Bull slung the man across the floor and leaped for the bar.

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Something tore at his side and Bull swerved and kicked at the figure which had suddenly slid in at his left. The native was lifted off the floor by the kick and the jungle knife fell from his nerveless fingers. Bull scooped the blade up, reached the bar and turned at bay.

"Come one, come all!" he gasped. "This little toy'll take the whole lot of you—"

He waved the weapon in front of him in a threatening gesture. And saw beads of red fly from it. Not till then did he realize he was wounded. He could feel the blood trickle from the slit in the flesh. He knew it was only a flesh wound. But he could not take this bleeding for long. He caught the flash of the thrown knife in the nick of time and ducked. It buried itself in the wood panelling behind the bar. Another came his way and this one almost did the job. He barely ducked in time and as it was felt the blade slice a nick out of his ear lobe.

Help came from an unexpected source. The stocky man who had started the fight suddenly shouted:

"Get those native boys. They're using stickers."

The room was cleared in a moment. Bull leaned weakly against the bar, the knife drooping from his fingers. The stocky man stepped to his side, a wide grin on the man's mashed lips, the blood still dripping in a steady flow.

"You sure can hit, matey," he said grudgingly. "Too bad those natives started throwing the stickers. We'd have had one hell of a good time. Say! You're hurt!" he suddenly saw the spreading stain on the undershirt.

"Huh?" Bull asked, trying to concentrate on what the other was saying.

"Hell! You're hurt. Better get you back to your base. Lend a hand here, mates."

Instantly, the same men Bull had been battling were at his side, their rough calloused hands tender as they could make them as they lifted him up and carried him out. It took four of them to carry him the quarter mile to the base.

"Thanks, men," Bull said as he pulled himself free. "I can manage from here on. I'll send for the medico—"

They turned at the sudden opening of the door. Bull felt the blood leave him as he saw Neela, struggling in the arms of a couple of seamen, come screaming and kicking from his room. Behind her, pale and determined, came Berthold. They stopped at sight of the disheveled and bloody Bull Weller.

"What goes here, Berthold?" Bull demanded. "I put you under arrest...."

"And I ordered him released," said a quiet voice from the doorway. "Consider yourself under arrest, Captain Weller, until further time as the case is brought to the proper authorities."

BULL HAD come erect at sight of the gold braid on the man's sleeve. He had recognised him immediately. Admiral Bryan, head of the Air Arm of the Navy.

"May I ask what happened, sir?" Bull asked in a low voice.

"Too many things," Bryan said. "The work was not progressing satisfactorily, we could not get a proper answer as to why, reports were coming in of your actions, and I thought the importance of your task demanded my personal investigation. You knew the fleet of the invaders from Star X would be here within six months. The finding of Hagelium was of the utmost importance. Yet

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you found time to consort with a native girl, drink *kilo*, a forbidden drink, until you could no longer think straight, and the greatest crime of all, allow yourself to become an accessory in the crime of sabotage."

"Sabotage!" Bull roared. "That's a lie!"

"No it isn't," Bryan replied. "Do you know why the Hagel counter never showed the presence of Hagelium? Because the native girl tampered with it while you were under the influence of *kilo*—"

"Neela! Not you," Bull said.

She broke free and suddenly leaped at Bull, spitting at him, her fingers hooking at his face, tearing the skin to bleeding ribbons. The guards pulled her away while she screamed:

"Pig-Earthman. Killer of helpless old men. Old fool, kilo-drunk. Aah! How I fooled you—"

Bull heard his brother's voice as from a long distance:

"I tried to tell you, Ed. But you wouldn't listen. Neela was Leepa's daughter. They tried to sabotage the work from the beginning. I got wind of it and tried to worm it out of the girl but she caught on. There was a fight and I had to kill the native. You wouldn't listen, you bull-headed fool."

Bull turned away from his brother's pitying eyes and mumbled:

"I was only trying to do my duty. I was only trying to do my duty."

"Duty," Admiral Bryan said slowly, "is an elastic word and does not bind all the time. You were blind to the important things in your pursuit of duty. And so you failed, even failed to maintain what you held the most important thing. Look about and see where your duty led. Sloppy personnel, maintenance in disrepute, discipline at a low ebb, and worse, open sabotage. There is no excuse, Weller."

"I-I'm not try-trying to ex-excuse...." Bull Weller began and slumped to the ground in a faint.

"WHAT TIME is it, guard?" Weller asked. He felt better, refreshed, and no longer stiff.

The guard turned a worried face toward the man on the bed.

"Huh?" he asked foolishly.

"What's wrong?" Weller asked at the worried look on the man's face.

"Listen," the guard said.

Weller stepped to the window before the guard was conscious of his move. He saw and heard then what was happening. The camp was being attacked. Tiny flashes of orange flame lit the night and showed where the forces of the *Star Queen* and the Admiral's ship, *The Missouri*, were fighting.

"How long's this been going on?" Weller asked.

"Since dark. They got to the generator and smashed it. And the dirty savages are like snakes. They sneak in, cut with those damned slicers, and run."

Four days had gone by since they had placed him under guard at the make-shift hospital. The wound he had suffered, healed quickly and well by the end of the fourth day and now Bull felt restless, anxious to get out, at least for a walk. But they had told him another day would have to pass before he would be permitted exercise. Now he peered through the window at the strange fight raging below. And suddenly he made his mind up.

The guard fell like pole-axed steer under the sledge-hammer blow Bull shot to the side of his jaw. In an instant the ray pistol in the guard's holster was in Weller's hand and seconds later he was slipping down the quiet corridors.

The natives had picked their night

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for a fight. The clouds were thick and heavy, and sweat poured from Bull Weller in a constant stream as he made his way toward the fighting. Bull guessed at the reason for the battle. The giant machines had already started their work and shortly the Hagelium would lie snuggly in the hold of the *Star Queen*. It was to the prevention of that which led to the attack.

He stumbled over a body knelt at its side and saw it was a sailor from the Admiral's ship. The man's head hung by a thread of bloody flesh. Weller dropped on the instant. The only way to make progress, he realized, was to crawl. The ground was sopping wet and in a moment he was not aware of physical discomfort. He had to get to Berthold and Larry!

Something moved to his right and he froze. Again the something moved. Then he saw it, a completely nude native, jungle knife in hand, stealing through the knee-high grass. The native grunted once, sighed and died, as Weller drove home the blade.

Once more Weller began to crawl forward. He had the lay of the land pretty well in mind. The Earthmen were entrenched somewhere ahead. Now and then he caught the flashes of their ray pistols. His own was tucked safely in the waistband of his shorts. The knife he had taken from the native when he fell on him was in his right hand, ready for instant use. At least it would be silent and as efficient as the ray pistol.

HE LOST track of time and place, only knew that he had to be fairly close by now, as he crawled along. Then he came to a rise and peered over the edge of it. He grinned widely when he saw that he was but thirty yards from a group of the Earthmen. The grin faded when he saw what lay between him and the others. At least a hundred of the natives were in the open, prone on their bellies, waiting the chance to slip in....

He knew he had to risk it. Rising to his feet Bull bellowed:

"Larry! Tom Berthold! It's me, Bull!"

It was a chance in a hundred he took that either Larry or Tom would be among those below. But they were. Their answering shout sent him pounding across the grass, straight toward the hidden natives. He ran low, as if he were still playing football for Air-Annapolis, the knife held firmly in his hand.

Men rose from all sides and tried to intercept him. Some reached him only to fall beneath the slicing blow of the sharp knife. But some managed to get in blows of their own. How it happened that none were serious in nature was a miracle of luck. And a greater one that Bull won through. But in the excitement of his sudden dash the natives had lost their heads and had risen to their feet. The ray pistol and rifle fire cut them down in their tracks, the instant Bull crossed over.

"Damn it!" Larry growled as he embraced his brother. "The Admiral'll have you executed for this."

"Yeah. Yeah," Bull said gruffly. "Later. Right now we got to beat these guys. Where's Tom?"

"Right here, you bull-headed ape," a voice spoke out of the darkness at Weller's side.

"Good! Fine. These our boys, Tom?" Weller asked.

"Every one."

"Mind if I take over?" Bull asked, and without waiting began to issue orders. Larry and Berthold gasped at what Bull planned. Yet if it worked the battle would be over in short order. There was one hitch to it, though.

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"—The trouble is," Berthold explained. "They're between us and the ship—"

"So we fight our way in," Bull said calmly. "Just like that."

"Just like that," Larry Weller said to himself. And marvelled as he always had in the past, at the daring of his elder brother.

IT WAS hand-to-hand battle. Their weapons were useless in the darkness. More, they could not risk indiscriminate firing for fear of hitting a comrade. Men died and fell as the two forces met. Bull shouted, his voice clarion-loud, as he slugged and stabbed at whatever naked shape came in his path. Silently, but as vicious and efficient, Larry and Tom fought at his side. Time after time it seemed they could not possibly win through. And time after time Bull Weller's sheer guts paved the way over a heap of dead bodies. The three men were bleeding from many cuts though none serious in nature, by the time they reached the *Star Queen*.

The hundred which had started to the ship were half that in number. But they were enough for what Bull planned. Within a matter of minutes the land anchor was shipped and seconds after, with Bull at the helm, and Tom and Larry at the firing command posts, the *Star Queen* lifted her spheroid shape into the air. Bull whipped the ship back and forth in slow runs to make sure he had enough air speed, then gave the command for the execution of his plan.

Night turned into day as hundreds of lights flashed their brilliance from the belly of the ship. And as the scene lighted and the shapes of men were made plain, Tom and Larry set their gun boards to work, firing with small calibre heat guns. The natives below melted before the ravaging flames and ran blindly to escape the holocaust of fire from the sky. And a lone figure stood erect, his greying hair blowing in the breeze, and his head tilted back.

"Whoever did that will get a double-promotion. On my word of honor!" Admiral Bryan said.

* * *

ADMIRAL BRYAN looked at the bandaged figure of Bull Weller and shook his head wryly. The three, Bull, Larry and Tom Berthold stood at rigid attention before the Admiral. The *Star Queen* was back at anchor again.

"You have done a magnificent job, Bull," the Admiral said.

"Thank you, sir," Weller replied.

"But despite your work I must, regretfully, pass sentence on you. The charges you face are serious, as well you know. And since you were guilty of them I am forced to do what must be done. Ten years at hard labor, Edward Weller, is the minimum I must pass upon you."

Bull Weller paled and gulped. He knew the Naval law as well as the man facing him. Bryan was right, Weller thought. There was no way out of it....

"Gentlemen," Admiral Bryan suddenly was tense and low-voiced. "I have been informed by the Admiralty, that we are officially at war. The fleet of the invaders from Star X has been sighted. I was also notified by Admiralty that the sabotage which took place on Venus was inspired by traitors who used the guise of tourists. This I tell you in passing. The important message, however, was the notification of war.

"It is important to all of you in many ways. By the authority vested in me by my superiors, Thomas Berthold is now a Captain of the Air Arm of the United States Navy. And Lawrence Weller, by that same authori-

(continued on page 96)

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TO THE VICTORS

By H. B. Hickey

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They had taken Mars in the name of Earth. And yet, it seemed that by taking the planet, they were actually being absorbed . . .

IN THE faint light of early dawn, with the wind still blowing cold off the polar caps, the rocket landed in a shallow valley of the dead sea-bottom. From hatches on both sides of the ship twin files of men issued, guns ready, and quickly fanned to points of vantage. When the protective cordon was complete the rest of the crew emerged, led by the captain.

Quickly the captain unfurled a large, varicolored flag handed to him by a junior officer. A single thrust was sufficient to drive the haft deep into the soft sand. As the wind rustled through soft silk, the captain spoke:

"By the authoriy vested in me by the federated peoples of Earth, I do hereby proclaim this planet, Mars, property of Earth, and all its lands and peoples subject to the laws thereof."

Only the whisper of drifting sands replied. The captain shivered, as though the wind had crept under his insulated jacket, and spun about to re-enter the rocket. His men followed him, stepping briskly. The hatch slammed shut.

"All right." The captain's lean, hard jaw jerked at the navigator. "Get that mumbo-jumbo in the log. 'On this hour, this day, this year, in the sight of God and his crew, etc., etc. . . . . '"

"Yes sir."

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While Harbison scurried forward to make the entry the rest of the men gathered around the captain. In the narrow aisle of the completely functional vessel stood the officers; the enlisted men hung from the tiers of bunks. The captain's sardonic gaze touched them all briefly.

"All right. It's official. We've effected a safe landing. We are the first men on Mars. Anyone want to cheer?"

"Yeah," a man said tiredly.

Captain Slater's mouth thinned to a long line. "A month's pay for answering a rhetorical question, Mannix."

A wave of angry silence broke against the tall, hard figure in the blue uniform, but left him unaffected. He had not been given this command on the basis of his popularity with subordinates. Popularity, he had always felt, was the small change from a broken authority; it made a pleasant jingle but bought nothing.

"Mr. Connerly—" his glance flicked at the stubby biochemist—"you may proceed with your soil samples. At any sign of danger return at once to the ship."

The little civilian stared at him. "But what about the atmosphere analysis? I'm supposed to—"

"You were outside a moment ago. Did breathing nauseate you?"

"Well no, but—"

"Then it's good atmosphere."

He turned to more important business. "Lieutenant Meers. Take ten men with you. You will scout the area—" Slater consulted a chart, "—six degrees due north of the *Solaris*. Should you—"

"Does that include that town?" Meers interrupted. "Sir?"

Slater's eyes measured the lieutenant and found him six inches taller. "No. I meant you to scout for fossils, or pretty sea shells."

Meers flushed and the captain resumed: "Should you find the village inhabited, make friendly overtures to the natives. But at the slightest sign of hostility you are to take decisive action. And if I may anticipate your question, Meers, *decisive* includes shooting to kill. That's all."

GLIMPSED from the ship as it glided toward a landing, the town had shimmered ghost-like, trailing an ectoplasm of rising mist from the empty sea on whose shore it stood. A small town; not more than half a hundred houses, Slater had estimated.

Toward it, his dark features still tight with anger, Meers proceeded warily. At his rear eight men formed a diamond; in the center of the diamond two men lugged heavy recoiless weapons. They were all tired; lessened gravity had been more than counteracted by the two feet of powdery sand through which they sloughed; and the thin air of Mars was no shield against the broiling sun.

Meers flung his right hand downward and the diamond came to an instant halt. The men watched him climb a final hummock.

In sunlight the town had a crystalline quality, low octagonal buildings arranged hexagonally. Meers studied it awhile; then, twisting around, he signalled one of the heavy-weapons men to him.

"Cover us from here," Meers ordered. "If anything happens, try to give us a chance to duck. But don't wait too long."

Now, with his last concealment behind him, Meers moved swiftly at the head of a lengthened diamond. Swirling dust, borne on the hot breeze, whispered caution in his ear. But it was too late for that. Besides, Meers had no imagination.

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Inside the village it was strangely cool. They moved among reedy trees, cobweb branches festooned like Christmas trees with green and violet and orange fruit. Underfoot the rosy grass was like fur, like mink the gently waving hedges.

In the gardens curtains of water, like panes of shattered glass, tinkled from invisible fountains to the accompaniment of strange music. On eight crystal legs the houses stared eyeless.

Meers parted a hedge and stepped through it. Two small creatures, the size of capuchin monkeys, lay on the rosy grass, drowsing. Without fur, without tails, they were the color of newly minted gold. Circlets of golden metal, the size of bracelets, clasped white tunics of iridescent material to their fragile waists.

Meers moved. Four eyes, like eight-faceted sapphires, shuttered at him. Shrilling, the creatures fled, their limbs flickering like golden xylophone hammers; the house absorbed them.

Keenly aware of the ugly weapon snouts that poked through the hedge behind him, Meers stood his ground. He waited only a brief moment.

A man appeared in the empty doorway. Stilt-legged, bone-thin of arm, with eyes like two round typewriter keys sunk in white skin, it was nevertheless a man. At least humanoid. Another figure, slightly more rounded, appeared beside it. The female of the species, Meers thought.

Keeping his left hand on his holstered gun, Meers stepped forward several paces. His right hand came up, palm outward, in the ageless gesture of peace.

There was a pause filled with the shrilling of the two creatures on a balcony above. Then the Martian and his woman stepped down from the doorway. Their own hands came up, palms outward.

ON SLATER'S map the town was now represented by a red circle. About him, in the control room, his staff clustered. Half civilian, it was therefore by half not of his own choosing.

"You deliberately provoked Lieutenant Meers and that crewman," one of the civilians said. "Why?"

Slater regarded him calmly. "To make their trigger fingers more reflexive. The situation may require a strong hostility factor; I supplied it."

"But suppose this town is only one of many. Have you thought what we may stir up?"

Slater had, in fact, given that question a good deal of thought. In the end he had made his decision on admittedly inconclusive evidence. He had radar charts made a year earlier by a robot rocket; the charts showed no cities at all. Yet it seemed reasonable to believe that while the radar might have missed a few towns, it could not have missed every one of a considerable number.

"I'll stick with probability," he grunted.

"That might be worse," a man in a gray suit grumbled. "We might lose our only chance for communication with the remnants of a culture."

"The time to admire a culture is after you've destroyed it," Slater told him. "No Custer's Last Stand for me."

"But it may be a superior culture to ours. There may be a life form superior in intelligence to ours."

"Precisely. And maybe superior in weapons. If so, why give them a chance to shoot first?"

He looked up as the biochemist entered the room. "Ah! Here's the culture I'm interested in. Soil culture. Well, Connerly, will anything grow in the stuff?"

"Anything!" Connerly chortled. "Probably been fallow a million

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years." Then his face lost some of its animation. "Of course it would take a lot of water."

Slater scowled. "Nice delivery on the death thrust. You should have been a toreador, Connerly. That's all."

Well, at least the problem of water, unlike the problem created by the appearance of the town, had been foreseen. And with an overpopulated Earth dependent on the solution to that problem, these fools could worry about moral niceties!

Still thinking about the water, Slater lifted a handset from his desk. If it stayed quiet they'd have to try drilling, unlikely as that prospect seemed.

"Captain Slater," he said. "Anything stirring?"

The officer of the watch matched his clipped tone. "Nothing, sir." His voice rose suddenly. "Wait! Something out there!" Slater heard him cursing his field glasses as they refused to focus quickly enough. "It's Lieutenant Meers and his party!"

"Cover them," Slater ordered.

He banged the handset down and paced out a half hour wait, impatience bubbling in him like acid in a vat. Meers must have run into something; otherwise he wouldn't have been gone so long. And despite his needling of the lieutenant, Meers was a good man. All good men, the captain thought, or they wouldn't be here; not on this trip.

MEERS PAID him back for the jibe by presenting a completely impassive countenance as he entered the control room. Simply by looking at him, Slater could get no hint of whether the news would be good or bad. "Report," he growled, letting Meers take the trick.

"Yes sir. The town is inhabited, sir. Somewhere around a hundred and fifty Martians living there."

"You made contact?"

"Yes sir. I had the men cover me—"

"Naturally," Slater interrupted. "Since we heard no firing I assume the natives are friendly."

"Well, yes and no, sir." Before Slater could snap at him again, Meers hurried on. "To tell the truth, sir, they just didn't seem too interested in us."

The captain's face was a mask of thought. He had made it a two-valued proposition, friendly or unfriendly. Indifference had not seemed even a remote possibility. And despite Meers' opinion, it still did not. The thing smelled slightly as far as Slater was concerned.

"You mean you swallowed that and strolled off, losing us the advantage of surprise?"

His scorn was withering but Meers stood his ground. "In view of certain facts I decided to suspend judgment. Of course I left half the men behind to cover the town and make sure nobody trailed us back here."

"You should have left all ten," Slater grunted. "But what are those facts?"

"First, they've got some kind of air conditioning. Not just the houses, but the whole town. Second, there's an abundance of flora, including fruit trees."

"Then there's water!" Slater's voice took on a scalpel edge. "I ought to break you for taking a chance like this!" He spun around and lifted his handset, intending to order immediate action, but Meers interrupted.

"Just a second, captain. They've got water, plenty of it. But it flows out of plain sheets of crystal quartz, or something like quartz. It's amost magical, sir, and I figured we'd better not take a chance of damaging anything until we get an idea of how it works."

The captain rubbed his jaw. Meers

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was a good man. If they got through this he'd recommend him for promotion. But he made certain his voice did not betray his thought.

"Did you parley?"

"Just a few signs."

"We'll have to improve that situation," Slater said. He turned away, then remembered Meers was still standing there. "That's all, lieutenant."

WITHIN a week the captain had a late supper in the town, in the very same house which Meers had first approached. It was his first visit to the town, and Slater disliked the idea of being in the enemy's camp. But drilling had failed to tap water, and time was running out.

He was as impressed as Meers had been. The house was comfortably warm, so were the gardens and the town itself; yet there was no visible heating equipment. Sheets of water still cascaded from the crystal quartz, but now the water steamed in the night.

Slater had lit a cigar and then let it go out. The heavy smoke had vanished instantly; there was no enjoyment without the visual, like smoking in the dark. He leaned back now, gossamer supporting his weight gently, and through the crystal roof saw Earth riding the night sky.

His host rolled an orange fruit through a small trough and handed it to the small golden creature on his shoulder. Sixteen slender digits accepted it, brought it to a tiny mouth. The next fruit went to Slater. Gingerly, he bit into it; just hot enough, it tasted like steak, medium rare.

"Very good," the captain murmured. "You seem to enjoy not only the luxuries, but also the more pleasant necessities."

His host thought about the remark. A week with language disks and the untiring efforts of Slater's linguist, brought along for precisely such a contingency, had taken the Martians well beyond Basic English. "We have what we need," the Martian said.

On the woman's shoulder, between bites of fruit, another of the monkeys chattered. Slater wished it would stop. He had some tricky terrain to navigate.

"Have you lived here long?"

"All our lives." The black eyes with their irregular white irises might have concealed humor; Slater couldn't tell. "What is your planet like?" the Martian asked politely.

Slater gave him a vague description of Earth, leaving out everything of real importance. The Martians seemed not to listen very attentively. Sparring, Slater thought. He got down to cases.

"That's an interesting device." He pointed to the trough on the table. "How does it work?"

"You put things into it. They become hot," the Martian said.

Damn them, they *were* sparring! But Slater did not let his exasperation show. He relit his cigar, using the motions to dispel some of his anger.

"Very interesting," he said, not quite keeping the dryness out of his tone. He put his thoughts on the sheet of crystal in the garden. "Also the fountain. That works very cleverly."

He half anticipated the answer, but to make matters worse the female Martian opened a panel in the wall and let a pair of violet birds into the room. Between the ungodly chirping of the birds and the shrill chattering of the two monkeys, he felt his mind lurch.

"Yes," the Martian was saying. "Very cleverly. In the heat of the day the water runs cold. At night the water is hot."

"But where does the water come

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from? Do you know?"

"From the crystal."

ANOTHER few minutes of that, Slater thought, and he'd have blown his damper. Pacing back through the bitter cold of the night, he let some of his anger find release. "Damn cute, aren't they?"

Around him, his officers growled assent. There was silence after that as they bowed their heads against a rising cloud of dust. Then the *Solaris* loomed ahead and for a while they were busy removing their insulated suits, shaking the powdery sand from themselves.

"Damn!" Slater cursed again, rubbing his cold hands together. "Figure the cubic area of that town, then realize the difference in temperature between the outside and inside. Imagine the power supply they must have! But if I'd asked them how they kept the town warm, they'd have said, 'with heat'."

"May I say something, captain?" inquired Berthold, the linguist. "It is possible these Martians are quite unintelligent. Notice how simply they live."

"That's a sign of inteiligence, I'd say," Slater grunted.

"In this case I think not, and I've spent more time with them than anyone except Lieutenant Meers. No, I'm reminded of the primitive Polynesians, especially by their childish devotion to their pets. They carry those little animals everywhere, you know; actually treat them like members of the family."

Slater's lips curled. "And these *primitive, stupid* Martians just *accidentally*, I suppose, invented all those things? No, I won't buy that."

"What if they *didn't* invent them?"

"What if—?"

"Precisely. It's obvious, by the resemblance between the Martians and those monkeys, that the pattern of evolution here has been much the same as on Earth. Eventually there emerged a super-race, which built this town with its wonders and perhaps many others. And then, as super-races will, proceeded to destroy itself.

"It's quite logical that the only survivors should have been those whose nervous systems were least sensitive. They simply moved into the vacant village and enjoyed its comforts, without at all understanding how anything works."

Slater grunted. "Quite a theory."

"Yes, but supported by observation. For instance, they have no concept of God, as we have. I tried to explain our notion of a Superior Being on several occasions. It elicited from them a word, half fearful and half reverent. *Thlanct,* or something like it, was the word. In all probability *Thlanct* is the legendary superrace that created this town, a race to which they attribute many of the powers we associate with the Deity."

The captain seemed to be only half attentive as Berthold spoke. His fingers toyed with the chart on his desk, tracing over and over the red circle which was the town. At last he picked up a pencil and with two quick strokes put a cross within the circle.

"Well?" Berthold demanded. "Doesn't that seem logical?"

Slater glared at him, annoyed at the interruption to his own thought. "What's the difference?" Then, as Berthold's eyes went wide, "That's right. It doesn't make a damn bit of difference!"

With a quick yank, Slater brought a speaking tube down to his mouth. His tone as he spoke was that of irrevocable decision.

"I want a general issue of small arms. At once! Break out portable floodlights. All hands prepare for immediate action!"

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HE HATED the necessity for explanation. His was the command; that should have been sufficient. But it was not. These incredulous and horrified stares were a silent demand for justification of his plan, and he would have to justify it.

"Perhaps you gentlemen have an alternative solution. Shall we pack up and go home?"

They sputtered, all trying to talk at once. At last one of them succeeded in shouting the others down. "Surely there must be another way! If you accept Berthold's theory—"

"Suppose I do. Or suppose I don't. The Martians either don't know the answers or they're simply not telling. Which means we'll have to expropriate their property so we can subject it to analysis, or use strong methods of persuasion. Either will be resisted."

"But this is brutal, inhuman!"

Slater remained calm. "Of course. Whenever man meets an obstacle in the path of his conquest of the universe he removes it by being brutal and inhuman. I'm only following precedent."

"But to murder innocent people who haven't lifted a finger against us!"

"Not people," Slater reminded him. "Martians."

He saw that he had scored a point. After all, they were only Martians. Looked at in that light, there was a difference. It would obviously have been foolish to let one hundred and fifty Martians stand in the way of the federated peoples of Earth.

"Good," Slater said. "Then that's settled."

He was already zippering his insulated outer garment, glad that for the rest he would be dealing with men who knew how to take orders without asking foolish questions.

Watching his men file out of the *Solaris*, the captain even felt a surge of pride. These were Earth's finest, every man battle-hardened, a perfect fighting machine equipped with the best weapons of an advanced civilization. Marching over the cold sands beneath the twin moons of Mars, they symbolized to Slater the irresistible march of his race.

He gathered them around him at the last hummock before the town. Crisply, he ticked off their assignments; these to encircle, these to man the floodlights, these to infiltrate. And, as always, he himself to lead.

They went in quickly, like wraiths, into the sleeping town. Drifting through the furry hedges they made no more sound than the sighing breeze. On silent feet they slipped into the houses, through the doorways without doors.

To Slater, as he stood in a garden, it seemed as though the houses, even the warm, bubbling fountains, welcomed them. How long had they waited for someone who could appreciate them and put them to use?

Wait no more, he thought. His right hand lifted; his index finger tightened on the trigger of his gun.

Instantly the town was bathed in the harsh glare of the floodlights. And without perceptible lapse of time, as he had known would happen, there came from within the houses the brittle sound of gunfire.

IT WAS over quickly. A few scattered screams Slater heard. He even recognized the word. It was the one Berthold had mentioned: *Thlanct*. Slater's lips curled. The gods were always too late to help.

And yet with the guns already silent, with the men beginning to appear in the doorways, it seemed to the captain that he still heard screaming. Echoes, perhaps. But too shrill for echoes.

Looking up, he saw the golden

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creatures appear on the balconies. "Why? Why? Why do you destroy our servants?"

Shrill, like the chatter of angry monkeys, but still recognizable.

Thlanct, Slater's mind said. The possibility too outrageous for him to have considered; that the humanoids should have been the pets and the golden capuchins the masters.

And yet it made sense. Like well cared for canine pets on Earth, the humanoids had been made comfortable, had been given enough to eat, even the scraps from the mouths of the *Thlanct.* Enjoying the benefits of *Thlanct* science, they had understood it no better than a dog understood electricity.

Strange humanoids had come; to play, perhaps. They had been treated well, even fed, as a neighbor's dogs might be. But they had repaid kindness with murder.

Our servants! Our pets! There was anger and the threat of retribution in the shrill cries.

Quite calmly, even aware of his voice shouting orders, Slater raised his gun and sighted along the barrel. And something like a wave of rising heat shimmered toward him, rolled over him and over his men.

Under Slater's feet the rosy grass was springy and soft. He paused lethargically beside the fountain and let the water run over his hand and a shrill voice in his ear told him to move along. He moved.

Beside one of the reedy trees he stopped again, this time to pluck a purple fruit which he handed to the golden creature on his shoulder. In a little while the unconsumed portion was handed back down. Slater chewed it ruminatively.

In the next garden Lieutenant Meers also plucked a purple fruit. Across the hedge his eyes met those of Captain Slater. There was no recognition.

And near the shore of the dead sea-bottom, the rocket ship lay, already half hidden by sand. Over it blazed the Martian sun; its requiem was whispered by the dry and burning breeze. But in the town there was cool and quiet.

THE END

(continued from page 87

ty, a full Commander. As for you, Edward Weller, I grant you full pardon by that act of war, which enables me to pardon prisoners who warrant a pardon. Hell. We need men like Bull Weller.

"How do you feel now, Rear Admiral?"

"Rear Admiral?" Bull gasped.

"Yes. I promised the man a double-promotion, who thought of using the *Star Queen.* And although no one heard me I felt duty bound to keep that promise."

"Duty bound—?" Bull asked in a low voice.

"Yes. And remember, duty is a flexible thing Bull. Don't use it as a rod."

"Not anymore. I'll go to Tom and Larry first," Bull promised as the four sat down to the game of poker they had started earlier, before Bryan had received his message....

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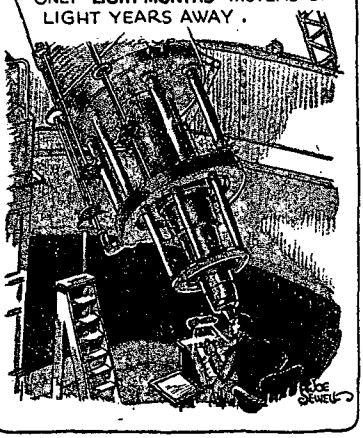
RIDDLES OF SCIENCE

How Large is the Universe?

SCIENCE HAS LONG TAUGHT THAT THE UNIVERSE IS A TREMENDOUS GALAXY, COMPOSED OF ISLAND UNIVERSES LIKE THIS **SPIRAL NEBULA**, EXTENDING B'LLIONS OF LIGHT YEARS INTO EMPTY SPACE . . .

EINSTEIN ADVANCED HIS **FAMED THEORY**, AND PROVED THAT THE UNIVERSE WAS **CURVED**, THEREFORE BOUND AND LIMITED. HE GREATLY REDUCED THE CONCEPTION OF ITS SIZE . .

LATELY, **ASTRONOMERS** HAVE BEGUN TO SUSPECT THAT LIGHT HAS NO CONSTANT SPEED, AND THAT **THEIR** MEASUREMENTS OF DISTANCES OF STARS IS MUCH **TOO GREAT**; THAT THE UNIVERSE IS MUCH SMALLER, AND STARS ONLY **"LIGHT MONTHS"** INSTEAD OF LIGHT YEARS AWAY.



ALL through the ages man has looked at the stars and wondered how far away they were. And as his knowledge advanced, his concepts changed, until finally the "universe" grew beyond his imagination. He imagined a limitless void, filled with millions of galaxies of stars, but he asked himself, "What's beyond?" and got no answer. Science has advanced theories which suggest that the three dimensions of man's perception are not good "yardsticks" of the universe's size, because there are other dimensions beyond them, definitely finite, in actuality, not immense at all. Proof is still lacking.

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Microbes From Space

By THORNTON AYRE

There was no reason for buildings to fall, yet they did, filled with a weird murmuring.

CHAPTER I

Death Comes to New York

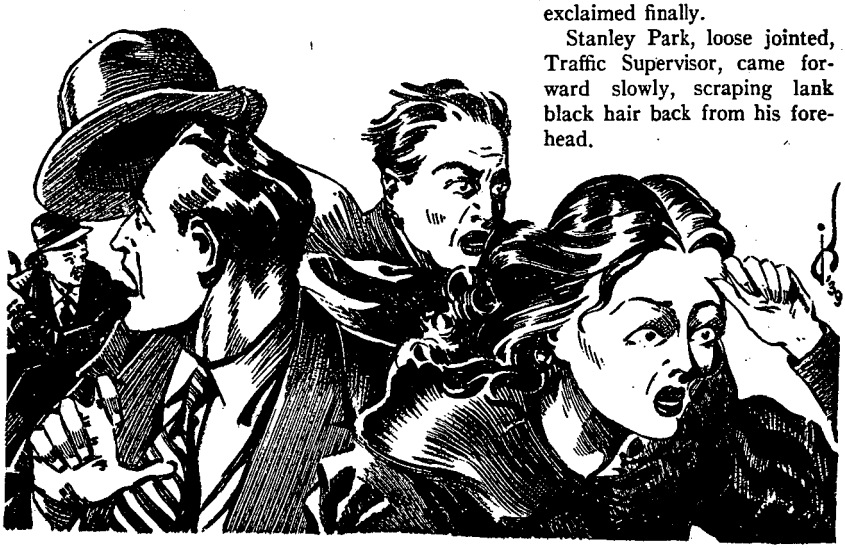
SUMMER darkness had settled over New York. For a few minutes there was a transient quiet—a quietness that bordered on uneasiness as through every quarter of the city there crept that murmuring, that strange, incredible murmuring that had existed now for two days and nights.

Then the lights, born of atomic power, came up. Festoons of lights—advertisements — millions of windows. Power—the vast power of 1970—surged again. Night took on duty. Traffic roared; trains screamed; an airliner moved unerringly to the radio directional towers. . . . And the murmuring was forgotten—for a time.

Deep in the midst of this maw of human industry a dark headed, gray eyed, youngish man pored over a long record sheet that had just been brought in to him. His frown deepened; his expression changed to alarm. Never in his experience as Chief of the New York Bureau of Public Safety had he seen such a list of accidents.

"Say, Stan, take a look at this!" he exclaimed finally.

Stanley Park, loose jointed, Traffic Supervisor, came forward slowly, scraping lank black hair back from his forehead.



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"Something devilishly wrong here," Martin Day said, half to himself. "Three elevateds wrecked, two subway collisions, and now a transatlantic airliner drops to pieces in midair!"

Park studied the report and sucked his teeth. "Just goes to show you," he sighed. "Always trouble everywhere—nothing but trouble. Guess it must be the human element—"

"Human element nothing!" Mart glared up at him. "It just couldn't enter into things like this. Yesterday there were four big smashes — day before there were two. Now we have six—"

He broke off and turned as the radio started into life.

"Calling Bureau of Public Safety, New York! Triple smash-up on Bronx subway. Three trains jumped rails—collided. Dead estimated at five hundred. All ambulances ordered to spot instantly. Bureau, investigate immediately! That is all. . . ."

Mart smiled bitterly as he stared at Park's frozen visage.

"Well, laugh!" he snorted. "You thrive on trouble. Now's your chance—Better grab a hat and come with me. We've got to make some sort of a report on this, but God knows what it will be. Step on it, will you?"

ONCE they arrived at the scene of the disaster both men stood momentarily aghast at the extent of the damage. Dead were being carried constantly through the haze and dust of the blocked subway. Electric lamps flared their brilliance on tangled disorders of twisted steel and shattered glass. The wounded were shouting and screaming, only to be drowned out by the savage rattle of electric drills and the clangor of sledgehammers.

"Whew!" Mart whispered, pushing up his hat from his forehead. "This is about the worst of them all—" He broke off and grabbed a pallid doctor as he stumbled along the track.

"Say, any reactions from the survivor's?" he demanded, seizing the man's arm. "Any of them suggest a cause of this mess?"

The medico shook his gray head. He recognized Mart's face in the lights.

"Nothing definite, Mr. Day. Several of them have said it was the murmuring that did it— Absurd, of course. . . ." He pulled himself away and went on down the shattered vista.

Mart's face was puzzled as he stared after him.

"Delusions, I'd say," Park said sepulchrally. "Can't be an actual moaning—more likely caused by the wind. Else it's the dead trying to return—"

"Damned silly superstitious rot!" Mart snorted. "Be yourself, man. This is real, horrible tragedy! We've got to explain all this to the public. If we say that the murmuring caused it what's going to happen to us?"

They turned, headed slowly to the actual site of operations.

A METROPOLIS harassed by a growing daily toll of horrible accidents paid hardly any attention to the individual report of the Bronx subway disaster. Even less attention was devoted to the theory of the "murmuring." Those that did digest it said it was fantastic and that the Bureau needed reorganizing.

Some averred that people were suddenly losing their minds and thereby causing accidents. That was all very well, and feasible, in regard to train and general traffic smashups—but when it was found that buildings too were starting to break up, crushing those inside without the least warning, the human element had of necessity to be ruled out. Something was awry with the entire city! Nothing was safe!

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A significant feature was that as the area of damage increased the murmuring became more audible. Until at last, after a week of smashing buildings, tumbling elevateds, and collapsing airliners the murmuring could be heard even above the natural roar of the city itself. . . . Yet, according to close inquiry, no other city had as yet heard this strange sound though thousands of people poured in just for the novelty of hearing it.

Mart Day became increasingly haggard. Upon him—and to a lesser extent on Park — devolved the whole responsibility for public safety and with natural savagery that fury of a terrified public descended on the Bureau. Desperately though he tried, Mart could do nothing in the face of this mysterious horror. All he could do was set the Bureau's analysts to work and spend his own time in trying to keep calm amidst chaos.

And the sweating analysts could find nothing! Every time they arrived on the scene of a disaster they found smashed and crumbled steel girders that no longer had any appearance of their former stable molecular structure. They tested and examined, peered through powerful microscopes, brooded over powdery gray dust that had been solid steel.

But Mart Day was keenly aware of the human side. He envisaged the ghastly slaughter that was likely to accrue unless science sowehow got to the root of the problem. The analysts, he felt, had missed something. Why, for instance, did the steel stop humming once it had collapsed?

He was no scientist in the practical sense; that was the main trouble—but at least he had the advantage of knowing where to locate one of the finest scientific brains in the country—Dr. Ward Black, his fiancee's father.

CHAPTER II

Mystery

EVA BLACK'S quiet, intelligent features were visibly concerned as Mart was shown into the spacious lounge of the New York apartment. she got to her feet immediately, held out slim hands.

"Mart, dearest!" Her violet eyes searched his pale, lined face. Quietly she led him to the divan.

"Yes, I know the strain you've been under," she said gently, as he glanced at her. "This horrible business of accidents— It's all so—so ghastly!"

"I rang you up twice in the fortnight preceding this awful week to try and make a date," Mart said slowly. "Maid said you were out of town. That right?"

The girl nodded slowly. "Yes; I have been away. . . ."

Mart stared dully round the well furnished room with its softly shaded lights.

"Everything all right here?" he asked presently.

"So far—yes, but with the things that keep happening I don't suppose anywhere is really safe. . . . Mart, what did your men find? Surely they found *something?*"

"Nothing," he answered, with a hopeless shrug. "First we worked on the idea that steel might have reached a mutational change, even as uranium after millions of years changes into radium, then into polonium, and finally lead. We thought maybe steel had gone into a radioactive category— But we were wrong. Then we tested steel that hadn't broken down and we found it OK. The only fault is that it murmurs —*Murmurs!*" he repeated, almost shouting the word. "God, Eva, that murmuring is driving me crazy!"

"I suppose everybody feels that

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way," the girl said, soothingly. "I hear it in this room— Somehow, I've become accustomed. . . ."

"I came really to see your father," Mart went on quickly. "He is about the only man who can possibly help us. In fact he's *got* to help us! The whole safety of New York, maybe of the world, depends on it! Good heavens, if steel should start to fail all over the globe—" He left his speculation unfinished, aghast. Then Eva said slowly.

"I'm afraid you can't see father, Mart."

"Huh? Why not?" he demanded, staring at her.

"Bacause. . . ." Her little mouth set with sudden firmness. "Because he's working on an experiment that must not be disturbed. He's at his laboratory, underground, behind locked doors, and nobody can get at him except me. I gave him my word that under no circumstances should he be interrupted."

MART gazed speechlessly for a moment, then suddenly he seized the girl's arms in his strong hands.

"Girl alive, do you realize the *urgency* of this?" he cried. "No experiment can be important enough to take precedence over human life. You've *got* to get him! If not that, then tell me where his laboratory is and let me see him."

"No, Mart—I can't . . ." The girl looked away, and as she did so the light caught her smooth forehead. Mart found himself noticing for the first time a scar marring its perfection. For the moment he forgot her strange adamancy.

"Say, where'd you get that?" he exclaimed, touching it lightly. "You never had it before. . . . Gosh, what a welt! What caused it? Incidentally, where *did* you go during that fortnight—?"

"Anything else?" she said coldly.

"I only asked!" he snapped.

"It seems," the girl said slowly, "that you came here to ask a lot of unnecessary questions—questions that I have no intention of answering. I don't see that I have to consult you if I decide to go away for a few days. . . . As to this scar it's nothing—only a bump. . . ."

Mart laughed shortly "I know the mark of an electroknife when I see one. Must have been a surgical job."

Eva sprang to her feet, surprisingly flushed and angry.

"Look here, Mart, I think it'd be better for both of us if we postponed seeing each other until we're both in a better humor—before we say something we might be sorry for."

He got slowly to his feet, eyeing her levelly. "What's wrong, kid?" he asked quietly. "What's all the mystery about? *Something* did happen in those two weeks, and you're scared to death that I'll find out what it was. . . . *What caused that scar?"*

She remained stonily silent, eyes blazing sullen defiance.

"Then you won't tell me where your father is?" Mart demanded. "You'll let the whole city go to rot first?"

Still she did not speak. Mart snatched up his hat furiously.

"O.K.!" he snapped. "How the hell do I know but what your father started the whole thing? Yeah — he's crazy enough. He must be crazy to have a daughter like you, anyway—!"

Then he was gone, the door slamming behind him.

AFTER a night's sleep Mart regretted his impulsive remarks of the night before. His nerves were steadier again: he realized he had been pretty close to breaking point. First thing he did from the office was ring Eva, was told by the maid she had gone away again, indefinitely.

That did not satisfy him. He took the

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time off to visit her apartment.

"O.K.," he growled, as the maid merely repeated her words on the telephone. "I'll leave her a letter—and see she gets it the moment she comes back."

He settled himself down at the desk, wrote a meek note of apology and began to seal it in the envelope. As he moistened the flap his gaze settled quite naturally on the blotting pad, fixed on the reversed words—

". . . get well soon. Your affectionate Dad."

Get well? Scarred forehead? The two connections leapt automatically into Mart's mind. He was still puzzling over that two weeks in which the girl had vanished, the close of which coincided with the coming of the murmuring. . . .

Finally he sealed the envelope hurriedly, glanced around, then carefully took the top sheet of blotting paper and thrust it in his pocket. . . . He handed the letter to the maid as he went out.

Back in his office he turned all the stresses and strains over to Park for a while, while he studied the blotting paper in a hand mirror. What he could decipher left him more puzzled than ever. Obviously the letter had been written by Dr. Black himself: also, obviously, the girl had not been home for a personal discussion, nor had it been possible to telephone her. What there was of the letter was mystifying—

". . . so necessary nobody must know yet. Your courage in coming with me, my dear, was magnifi— And so high, too! One hundred and fifty miles, which . . . definitely an advance, if only it had not ended so tragically . . . and must work out details in my laboratory immediately.

"Get well soon,

"Your affectionate,

Dad."

MART sat staring in front of him, extinguished pipe between his teeth.

"Hundred and fifty miles high?" he muttered. "All ended so tragically? *What* did? Boy, I'd give my soul to know what happened in those two weeks Eva was away. I'll wager every cent I've got that it started the murmuring—"

He glanced up as Park came in, even more worried than usual.

"Worse than ever!" he groaned. "Murmuring noises have gone up by fifty percent today. People are being driven crazy with the racket. As for accidents— Whew! Twenty buildings in two hours this morning. Just collapsed into dust heaps! God knows how many dead. . . . Mart, we've got to *do* something!" he wound up in desperation. "We're the Bureau that's supposed to handle the responsibility for all this. Where do we start?"

"Might start by finding out what all this means," Mart snapped, indicating his notes and the blotting paper. "At best it's a hunch, but with too many coincidences to escape notice—" He jumped to his feet, snatched his hat. "I'm going to get the truth out of Eva if I have to beat it out of her. I've got to find her, somehow, even if I tear the city apart."

"Leave it a couple of days and you'll have no need!" Park sighed.

CHAPTER III

Tragedy

TO find Eva and force her by some means to piece together the odds and ends of the puzzle was a bigger problem than Mart had reckoned. Realizing he could do no more good at the Bureau he spent his time to the better advantage of trying to find the girl.

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Mart wandered for hours, through the city that had lost its ordinary business normalcy. In all directions were fleeing people; on every hand, it seemed buildings were falling steadily like decks of cards. The ruin since the murmuring had begun was well nigh incredible—and it was a ruin that was advancing with tragic speed.

Automatically he turned toward the girl's apartment block for a last call. She might have returned— Then he stood appalled. The entire block had fallen down, was a tangled mass of bricks and girders, surrounded by ambulances, flaring lights, hoarse policemen, haggard and bloodstained civilians.

HE ran forward quickly, fought his way through the crowd to the roped-off front, stood staring at the survivors as they gazed in bewilderment at the ruins. . . . Then suddenly his heart bounded. There *was* Eva, in a torn dress, swaying to and fro holding her forehead. Dust smothered her from head to foot.

"Eva!" Mart screamed madly, and before anybody could stop him he burst through the cordon, clutched the girl's fainting form in his arms.

"Eva!" he panted. "What's wrong, kid? Hurt?"

She smiled wanly in the play of lights. "My—my head. . . . It sings and murmurs like the city. I—It's no use hiding it," she muttered, making a sudden effort. "The laboratory was under the apartment block — re-enforced basement. Dad's trapped down there; I got out just in time. Laboratory's safe, but the door's blocked. Get him out, Mart —he'll suffocate down there! Get him out! The whole city depends on it. . . ."

The girl closed her eyes, leaned against him. Mart gave a yell to the nearest workers, bawled hoarse instructions. In a moment he was recognized and his orders obeyed. Desperately shoveling, struggling men began to dig at the spot indicated by the girl's weary arm. She heard Mart's stentorian commands as though in a dream.

"Get the doctor out—fetch him to my place—the Bureau. If it's still standing, that is. . . . Hurry, boys—hurry!"

Mart turned, shook the girl back into brief awareness.

"You?" he whispered. "You don't mean your *head* is murmuring, surely? You mean you *hear* the murmuring, like the rest of us?"

"No—no, inside me," she sighed weakly. "I—" She got no further; her knees buckled under her.

INSTANTLY Mart swept her up in his arms, staggered through the debris and out into the comparative clearness of the main road. He waded for a mile through jammed traffic and fallen bricks, at last staggered into the Bureau, which he thanked Providence had so far escaped. And the place was full of injured people. Doctors were working feverishly on all manner of injuries—some slight, others severe.

Mart blundered through the midst of the jam into his own office, found Park busy trying to keep a check on events. He watched in sober astonishment as Mart laid the girl on the divan.

"You found her, then?" he asked briefly.

"Obvious, isn't it?" Mart snapped. "Fetch a surgeon in here—one who can be spared from a trivial case. Hurry!"

Park leapt for the door. In a few moments a worried surgeon in a white smock came in. Without a word he went on one knee beside the girl, made a swift examination. Then he looked up surprisedly.

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"But this girl has no apparent injury!" he exclaimed. "All I can find wrong with her is shock and— Yes, she's humming!" he added, baffled. "Sounds as though it's coming from her head!"

The three men stood still from sheer perplexity, staring at the limp, ashy-faced girl. Then suddenly she stirred a little: without opening her eyes began to speak, hesitantly—

". . . a great gulf," she whispered. "Four little planets and four big ones. . . . One little one beyond. . . . Asteroids—Yes, the asteroids! Once a planet. . . . Now, just asteroids . . ."

The men crouched nearer, hardly breathing.

"Eaten away — crumbled," Eva sighed. "Tiny beings—eat metals. Very tiny. . . . Millions! Myriads. . . . Ohh. . . .!"

She went limp again. Mart stared at Park and the surgeon as though they were phantoms.

"You got that?" he asked hoarsely. "Tiny beings who live on metals? That's what's been in our steel! Tiny beings, so small we couldn't see them even with a microscope— Absorbed the alloys of steel just as white ants eat wood and leave the shell behind! Live in metallic interstices—! Once lived on the planet that is now the asteroids; it became asteroids because they ate it away. That must be it—" He broke off, scowled. "But how on earth did *she* know?" he demanded. "What makes her buzz—?"

He swung round, aware that a haggard, elderly man in a dusty suit had been standing in the doorway, listening. Now he came forward, carrying a shiny black bag in his hand.

"Dr. Black!" Mart cried thankfully, gripping his hand. "Thank God you're here, sir, and safe! I—"

"O.K., leave that for now, Mart," the scientist said curtly. "There's work to be done." He swung round on the surgeon. "Got anaesthetics?"

"Sure— But say, what's wrong with her?"

"Plenty!" Black compressed his lips. "Inside her forehead is a metal plate—steel. She was seriously injured recently and I myself put that plate in for emergency purposes—"

"But surely, silver or gold would—" the surgeon began; then he broke off as Black glared at him.

"I know all about that, man. I had no gold one handy—but I have now, and it's got to go in right away. . . ." He wheeled round and snatched a shaped gold plate from his little bag. "I guessed this would happen," he panted. "Don't you understand? The damned Murmurers have got through her flesh to the steel content in that plate! That plate contacts her brain centers at certain places. These blasted things are living, thinking creatures—metal eaters. I never knew before where they originated, but I do now I've heard Eva's observations. For a moment or two her brain centers must have contacted the united force of several of those tiny brains in the headplate. She spoke, as though in a dream, of what she read from those minds—Where the hell's that anaesthetic, man?"

The surgeon jumped into life, summoned an anaesthetist from the neighboring room. The door closed. . . . Within moments the girl was entirely flaccid with the cone over her face.

CHAPTER IV

The End of the Murmuring

BLACK did not speak again. He washed, then donned rubber

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gloves snapped out orders regarding the position of the lights, pulled immaculate instruments from his bag, then set to work.

As he worked, performed masterful trepanning—expert even for the advanced knowledge of 1970 medicine—the assembled men gained some idea as to why Dr. Black had once walked off with the world's prize for surgery.

No blood flowed; the electroknife prevented it. Probes which created automatic coagulation knitted the vital centers to the golden plate. The steel one, shining t h o u g h it was, already visibly pitted and scarred hummed as it was laid on the table.

For an hour Black worked, under intense strain, but at the end of that time his work was flawlessly done. He smeared across the final healing ointments, broodingly watched the scar on the forehead begin to knit slowly together.

Mart expelled a low, long sigh of relief. Black mopped his streaming face.

"She'll be all right," he said finally. "In a day or so— Needs rest. . . ."

The scientist turned aside, relaxed limply in the armchair, gratefully swallowed the glass of brandy Park handed to him. . . . Then Mart said quietly, "You realize, doctor, that you're about the only man alive who can suggest a possible means of destroying this ghastly menace?"

Black gave a brief smile, drained his glass. "I rather fancy I *have* destroyed it," he answered quietly. "Listen!"

FOR a long time Mart could not figure out what was different. Then suddenly he realized the truth.

"The murmuring's stopped!" he gasped. "Everywhere's quiet, for the first time in weeks— Dr. Black, what does—?"

"It means," the scientist said slowly, "that my reasoning is now justified. I started this whole business and it was up to me to destroy it—but to work out the details demanded absolute privacy and freedom. . . . I'll tell you what happened—

"In the first place, I tried out a new stratosphere globe I had invented—secretly, you understand. That was why no mention of it appeared in the papers. Eva was my only companion, and she came at her own request. We got up to one hundred and fifty miles . . ."

Mart nodded slowly, remembering the blotting paper.

"At that height," Black went on, "we became aware that our globe was smothered with rapidly growing pits and holes. The thing was humming, too. We came down rapidly, but before we had properly landed the globe fell in pieces. Eva was badly hurt, her head injured. For myself I somehow escaped. I rushed her to my laboratory and performed an operation on the spot, put in a temporary plate of steel. Then I dispatched her to a nursing home for proper care while I tackled the problem on hand—"

"You wrote her once?" Mart put in quickly.

"Yes—once." Black looked surprised. Then, "The trouble was that in the time I'd taken to operate on her that damned stuff in the globe had had time to spread. I got a piece of humming steel under my ultrapowerful microscope and with it I was just able to see the flux and conflux of myriads of minute creatures, living their own strange lives with an intelligent ordered scheme.

"In space, thanks to our globe, they had for the first time contacted an object heavy enough, and cool enough—as opposed to a meteor—to carry them down to Earth. In space, I imagine, they subsisted on metallic brickbats, which abound in the thousands. Likewise,

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these creatures are able to live in air or without it, at will. In space their numbers were of necessity limited—but once on Earth they multiplied with incredible rapidity. . . .They are best imagined, I think, as bacteria. Bacteria of high intelligence, the last race of the planet that is now an asteroid—even as in the end our own world will probably be ruled only by bacteria.

EVA'S statement, unconscious though it was, shows where they came from. My problem was to destroy them. I had to work fast and in private. I commanded Eva to keep our laboratory a secret from everybody. On no account was she to disturb me; on that the fate of New York depended. Once beyond city limits I might find myself powerless to stop the menace.

"I reasoned it out finally that just as a certain stimulus of radiations will promote and sustain life, so an overdose of that radiation can kill. Out in space, the most likely stimulus for these Murmurers would be cosmic rays. Excess of them, at close quarters, might kill. It wasn't difficult to build my cosmic ray projector — time was my biggest enemy. Atomic force is a mastered science today, of course. By using copper blocks in the disintegration chamber, the resultant energy from destruction of electron and proton became cosmic waves. I had then to grade their strength so they would kill the Murmurers and yet be harmless to humanity. At last I found the right strength—had every detail ready. Then the apartment block came down.

"Fortunately the laboratory is reenforced. It held. Eva dashed to the entrance and got out. I was caught. . . . Your men got me out, Mart. But something else was worrying me. I had been aware, before Eva herself, that her head was singing a little. My main desire was to reach her, operate, save her life. . . . I did the only thing I could. I picked what few scientists there were on the spot at the laboratory, showed them exactly how to turn the projector in the fashion of a searchlight— Then I snatched up my surgical instruments and came here. . . ."

"Those scientists evidently got the idea," Park said, thoughtfully. "They've stopped it all right. . . ."

"I told them to keep on turning until they got fresh orders. . . ." Black got to his feet "We've wiped it out in New York, yes; my radius would incorporate that. But wherever they appear outside New York, if they ever do, they must be instantly located and destroyed. There may be others in space; that is for space navigators of the future to puzzle out. . . . As to the murmuring, I expect you've realized it was caused by the ceaseless movement and industry of millions of tiny beings. Incessant activity. . . ."

Mart nodded slowly, stared out of window on the buildings that still stood. There was something enormously refreshing about that silence.

"We can rebuild," he said slowly. "And whatever has been said in this room goes no further. You started the business by accident, Doc—but all the world will know is that you *stopped* it! You were not to blame. . . ."

Black flushed warmly—then Mart turned aside as the girl on the divan stirred gently and opened her eyes.

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Illustration by Jay Jackson.

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BY
ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The Martian dynasty overthrown, the ex-princess is exiled to Earth under escort of Larry Sharon. Pursued by treacherous revolutionists, the unhappy pair face the deadly "Boiling Zone" of the sun

CHAPTER I
Rebellion on Mars

LARRY SHARON strode through the waiting room of Inter-Planet Import Co., main office in the capital of Mars. He put a dime into the slot of a machine which shrieked out for prospective newspaper buyers the latest interplanetary news. A newspaper, which, in seven centuries had found no equal as a purveyor of detailed information, fell into his hand.

Taking off his hat, and running a hand back over a rebellious mop of coal-black hair, he swung past the secretary, and pushed open a door reading Justin Pringle, Pres.

"Hi, J. P.," he said casually, and J. P. nodded, but went on reading a letter. Larry dropped into a chair, surveyed the newspaper nonchalantly noting the headline: MARTIAN MONARCHY OVERTHROWN.

"Well, the rebels ruz up and overthrew the reigning heads," he observed facetiously. "Looks like the kings get stepped on sooner or later on Mars as well as every place else."

"It happens." Justin Pringle dropped the letter and devoted his attention to his youngest buyer. He waved a scornful hand.

"There wasn't a monarchy left on Earth," he pointed out, "when Bursdell made the Moon; yet, within the next hundred years, every large expedition to land on a planet, went ahead and founded a monarchy. Kings and queens first. Dukes, lords, barons, after more settlers arrived. You wouldn't think it possible in a scientifically enlightened age—but that's man for you." As an afterthought, "Who is it this time? . . . Mars?" He appeared startled and

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opened his eyes. "Well, the Mars business finishes up another one, and I suppose Titan will catch the fever too. . . . Details?" There was a worried look in his eye.

"Oh, nothing much. All reigning members of the Martian aristocracy killed—except a Princess Helen. They can't finish her off deliberately, now that the heat of the rebellion is over. Guess they'd like to, but they'd have the condemnation of every planet in the solar system. Oh, yes, Mars has gone socialistic."

He expertly skimmed over smaller headlines, dropping the Martian matter, as if it were of no concern to him. "A single member of the last Venerian expedition came back alive—the usual story. Venerians are inimical to everybody but themselves, and they've got senses that enable them to detect intruders at once. . . . New comet sighted this side of Pluto—terrific velocity—small, about half a million miles in diameter—will make perihelion passage in four months, about. Hmm. Must be a fast devil." He read the details, then threw the paper aside.

"What's on your mind, J. P.? What's that funny look on your face for?" he queried, dangling long legs over the arm of his chair.

Justin Pringle was grinning crookedly. "You don't seem to be paying much attention to the Martian business, Sharon. But that's where you're going."

Larry shrugged his shoulders. "Not surprised. Been in worse places than that."

"Well, I'd hate to have you run into trouble, Sharon. Last month they reported having found tritonite—large deposits, too. There hasn't been much danger of any other firm snagging their output, since we're the only ones know how to use the stuff, but I've been letting it go too long, now. Mind running out, getting prices, and arranging for a shipping schedule?"

"Be glad to, J. P. I'd like some excitement for a change. I'll look up the Princess Helen," he added, his blue eyes mischievous.

"You're just the type for it," Justin Pringle growled. "You'll have to start in the morning, though."

Larry nodded, and tucking the paper under a muscular arm, rose to his feet, yawning, his jaundiced eye wandering to the window, catching glimpses of the web of bridges, cables, and catwalks that overhung the purring city two thousand feet below. Before he left, he cocked an eye at his superior. "How about your computer fixing me a decent curve this time—last time he had me playing tag with an asteroid belt, and there was a comet worrying my tail."

"Don't worry—we've never plotted you wrong yet. Send your course in the morning by vacuo. I'll be seeing you, Sharon—good luck."

In the administration building of the recently formed Union of Mars Socialist States, the newly elected Secretary of Foreign Affairs faced the manager of the newly discovered tritonite mines.

"I think I've got your man," the manager said quietly. "An American, of Earth. He represents the Inter-Planet Imports Co., commuting between here and his branch office on Earth. He has been making a deal with me for shipping tritonite to Earth. We get a nice price, and we've signed the papers. But he's just the type you need. Not overly intelligent, self-satisfied, Irish stupidity and devil-may care. And I'd say he was interested in money."

The secretary nodded musingly. "Offer him—no, ask him if he would like to earn a hundred thousand dol-

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lars. And if he accepts make an appointment that is agreeable to him." He paused thoughtfully. "Oh, yes. Assure him there is nothing underhanded which he will be asked to participate in." He dismissed the other man.

So it was that Larry Sharon, as curious as he was interested in accumulating at one stroke what amounted to a medium-sized fortune, and decidedly suspicious at the same time, rode through the fine, broad thoroughfares of Mars City, seeing evidences of anarchy and horror rather than socialistic order, and finally entered the centrally located administration building. A courteous aide led him with dispatch to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who, with numerous other members of the swiftly formed cabinet, stood or sat around.

The Secretary was small, cruel-eyed, mustached. He wore the conventional flaring trousers, and his waist coat had a touch too much of color. Sharon didn't like him. His bold eyes underwent no effort in meeting the other man's eyes.

"Did you want to see me—something about a hundred thousand dollars?" he inquired politely but with directness.

The man smiled, and rose to his feet. "Yes," he said precisely, and with a slight touch of patronage, "about a hundred thousand dollars. You are doubtless aware of the political turnover on Mars, Sharon," he went on. "We have routed the royalist element, for the most part eliminated the aristocracy which was draining the lifeblood of the—"

"Spare me," begged Sharon. "They used the same line three centuries ago on Earth. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," coldly. His eyes glinted. In one swift movement he crossed the room. He flung open a handsomely carven door that was marred only by the deep ax-gash some vandal had cut into it. He beckoned to Sharon, who with slight misgivings followed him into the room beyond the door.

It was a small room, with a single window that apparently overlooked a courtyard. It was barely furnished. In the middle of the room was a table. Seated at the table, reading by the light of a small lamp, sat a girl. Her head was raised, startled. She rose to her feet. She was garbed in the filmiest of materials, caught about the slim waist with a single purple sash. Her hair was black and flowing, and her face was beautiful with a creamy, flawless simplicity. But her eyes were strained from much suffering.

Staring at her, Larry hardly heard the Secretary of Foreign Affairs speak.

"Princess Helen," he waved a small hand, "Mr. Larry Sharon, whom we have engaged to transport you to your friends on Earth."

The expression on her face hardly changed, save that her eyes became a little more hopeless. She simply inclined her head.

"Blue blood," the secretary said in tones vicious with contempt. "She doesn't deign to speak to her inferiors." His manner changed, as Larry turned to stare at him.

"Yes, Sharon. We'll give you a hundred thousand dollars if you can get her to Earth safely. She is the last member of the royal family, and of course cannot remain on Mars."

Larry glanced at him coldly. He didn't like the way the man spoke of the princess—as if she were some inanimate object. "Why 'safely'?"

"She has enemies, Sharon."

"Naturally. But why choose me, of all people? Why not some one you know?"

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The secretary shook his head smilingly. "Do you think there is anyone on this planet we could trust? The royal family stirred up a lot of bitterness here, Sharon—"

"I realize that, too. But why not call for an escort, from Earth, from Ganymede, a large enough force to protect the princess from possible attack? Why assign one man to the job?"

"Because," impatiently, "we must get the princess off Mars immediately! We haven't the time to call for help in the matter. There are mutterings even now that the Princess be executed. So," he shrugged, "we learned of your arrival, looked into your character a bit, and are satisfied you are qualified for the assignment." His manner became at once stiff and haughty. "We'll take your answer now, Sharon. If not—" He let the sentence hang.

Sharon's eyes bored into those of the other man, as if trying to read exactly what was in his mind. Then he slowly turned his head toward the princess, who stood with pallid, hopeless face across the room. She seemed so royally remote from these calculating men that he felt it'd be a bold affront to touch the hem of her gown. He smiled a little ironically. "I accept," he said quietly.

CHAPTER II

A Tough Job

WITH a single movement the Secretary of Foreign Affairs reached into an inside pocket and produced a roll of papers. "Your instructions, Sharon."

Sharon unrolled the scroll, glanced at them. Leave at a certain time, down to the second. Use maximum acceleration after a certain point. He nodded to himself—the course they had plotted out seemed sensible.

"This will take me just outside the boiling zone?" * he inquired.

"Yes—as near as you can possibly get to the Sun. Earth, when you arrive there, will be in direct line with the Sun and the point in space which Mars now occupies. We have given you the shortest possible route to Earth; it is imperative that you make haste. You noted the time of your departure—the morning?"

Sharon nodded, and placed the instructions in a pocket. "I'll use my own ship, of course," he said matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry. That will be quite impossible. We will furnish you with a ship." The man's eyes were cold.

"Well, certainly there's no harm in using my own ship," Sharon began angrily.

"There is, Sharon!" sharply. "When your ship leaves, there will be immediate suspicion fastened onto it. We must take every precaution in the matter of the Princess Helen's safety—it isn't an idle matter with us. We have our prestige as a nation—"

"What make do I use then?" Sharon broke in, with a narrowing of the eyes.

"Hispano-Suiza."

"Model?"

"2422." Nonchalantly.

Sharon sprang forward, murder in his eyes. Almost as if by magic two men grasped him from behind.

"You can't do that!" he shouted. "Of all the modern ships, you have to pick on a Hispano-Suiza '22. They build up slow. What if some of these often al-

* The boiling zone is that area surrounding the sun which Space Navigators shun, because of the extreme heat, which literally "boils" alive the occupants of a space ship incautious enough to pass through it. It is also a region frequently filled with outflung incandescent material hurled from the surface by the tremendous explosions in the sun itself.—Ed.

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luded to 'enemies' should show up in a late model ship—they could outrun us ten times over, and that's one whale of a lot over long distances!"

The Secretary of Foreign Affairs quietly waited until Sharon had finished. He made a motion, at which he was released.

"Please understand, Sharon." He became deliberately patient. "We choose a Hispano because it is an old ship—inconspicuous. No one could possibly suspect—"

"—that the princess was aboard!" Sharon finished cuttingly. "All right. I waive all objections. Give me the money and I'll get the Princess to Earth."

He was disgusted with the whole proceedings. There was something wrong, he couldn't figure exactly what. But whatever it was—Lord, how could a man turn down the chance of helping that girl over there? When she sensed his looking at her she let him see, in one movement of the eyes, all the hopeless misery and despair that fate of the past and future had held, and would hold, for her.

When the Secretary of Foreign Affairs politely handed him a check drawn on a New York bank, Sharon as promptly and politely handed it back.

"I'll take cash, in platinum," he said coldly.

There was a moment of tense silence. The secretary drew back and conferred in hurried whispers with his colleagues. Finally he nodded.

"We'll deliver it to your ship in the morning," he announced.

"Fair enough. But there'll be no takeoff if I don't get the money."

An attendant came forward. "I'll

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show you your quarters, Mr. Sharon."

Sharon nodded, but before he left, he met the eyes of the girl again—she couldn't have been more than nineteen. He tried to put as much assurance in his glance as he could, but he supposed it didn't register, for her eyes remained distant, and her lips were tight except for a slight tremble. Sharon followed the attendant.

Under cover of darkness that morning, Sharon was smuggled into the ship. He didn't even have the opportunity to examine it—but he knew the Hispano-Suiza '22s. Heavier in the stern than in the stem, when anybody could see it should be otherwise, if you didn't want to run the danger of looping loops in mid-space. Jets, less than a square millimeter of firing surface for every square meter of the ship's area. But the fuel was good, and there seemed to be plenty, though of course the combustion system was practically barbaric.

"Where's the Princess?" he whispered to his guide, who was made ghoulish in the faint light of two moons.

"She is aboard," came the whisper. "Your money will be here shortly."

Sharon waited. The moment of the take-off was nearing.

A shadow was coming toward the ship, a man with a heavy satchel flung across his shoulders. Sharon's guide took it, hoisted it up to him. Sharon closed the outer valve, and then the inner valve, sealing himself within the ship.

Grimly he started to count out the money, by the simple process of throwing the dull platinum cartwheels into a corner. All were there. He looked at his watch and started forward. Thinking better of it, he went aft.

He knocked on a door beneath which shone a crack of light.

"Princess?" he whispered.

"Yes." The voice was low, frigid.

"I wanted to make sure you were safe. Will you please come forward later on? I've some things we have to talk about."

"I'd like to be alone for a few days," the princess made answer, still with that icy tone. "After that, I suppose I'll need companionship, and I'll have to find it where I can."

Larry emitted a gurgling sound. Wow! If ever a princess had used a royal tone, that was it! He staggered forward, and blasted off. But he found himself smiling a little.

He rocketed along until Mars had dwindled to a red speck a million miles astern. At that point, following instructions, he drove into maximum acceleration, setting his nose on the parabolic curve necessary. He went back and put his eye to the 16-inch, photo-amplifying refractor. As soon as he saw what he expected to see, he was going to consign those damnably accurate instructions to Hades, and follow whatever course he wanted to.

On the fifth day, the Sun visibly increased in angular diameter, but still more than one-hundred-thirty million miles distant, he heard a sound behind him. It was the princess.

"Oh—good afternoon, or whatever it is," he said coldly, but his pulse began to pound a little faster. She didn't look too much like a princess standing there—she was all girl. She studied his features a single moment and then subsided into a chair. She smiled.

"Are you a fool?" she asked presently.

"I don't think I'm qualified to answer the question," he replied tartly.

"I heard you counting your money," she complacently continued. "A hundred thousand dollars. That's the price

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you ask for your life. I think you will never spend it."

"I don't intend to spend it," he answered flatly. He relaxed. "That's what you're driving at, princess—my cupidity overcame my common sense?"

She nodded expectantly.

"Well, it didn't. *You* overcame my common sense." He turned angrily away. "I couldn't leave you in the hands of those vultures. As for the money—that's yours, if you'll take it. I don't suppose the revolution left you much."

She was silent. She presently said, in a voice she must have fought to keep from shaking, "Thank you."

Sharon devoted himself to correcting small errors on their ship's course. After awhile the princess said, "Of course, we both realize I am not supposed to arrive safely on Earth."

He turned to her slowly. "I'm glad you understand that, princess. No, they very likely wouldn't want a single member of the aristocracy alive. You might leave descendants, one of whom would secure backing to fight for the throne."

"You were very angry when they gave you a Hispano," she told him, her eyes twinkling. "But of course, they didn't care whether or not you escaped my 'enemies.'" She added mournfully, "But of course, they are my only enemies. All the people loved me. I know they did. They slaughtered my parents, but they would not touch me."

He remained silent. She met his eyes again. "It was brave of you to help me, Larry Sharon. But I think you have thrown your life away."

"Not if I can help it!" he exclaimed. "I'll give them a fight—" Then he stopped, laughing at himself. "But that's just talk, of course. Imagine a Hispano giving fight!"

They both laughed. "I am glad we are friends," she said naively. "I like you quite a lot."

He grimaced. "I like you, too—more than is going to be good for me."

"Why?" she demanded innocently. "I am only a woman, Sharon. Some day I will marry a man, not a prince." She smiled, added frankly, "You are nice—I may fall in love with you. Perhaps it would be a privilege. I did not love the heir to the Ganymedan throne, yet I was to marry him when I became of age." And instead of allowing him to become either surprised or discomfited at the unconventional statement, she said:

"Do you think there is much chance of escape?"

"Very little princess." He became grave. "You see, we can't outrun anybody. We're now following the shortest route to Earth, a curve that comes within fifteen million miles of the Sun, the nearest any ship can get without running into the boiling zone. That's the picture. Suppose there should be a ship waiting—no, they won't have a ship waiting, come to think of it. We'll smash past perihelion at enormous velocity, and they'd have to have a speed matching ours." He snapped his fingers.

"I'm beginning to get the plot, now," he ruminated. "They gave us this old model—slow. Now what if they had their figures computed down to the second and the mile. They could start after we did, and catch up with us exactly over the Sun, at our velocity. Training a heater on us seven seconds, the bulkheads of the ship would collapse. After that, it'd be easy to nudge us into the Sun, and no one would be the wiser."

Her face was expressive in its registration of horror. "That is why they

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gave you such detailed instructions," she exclaimed.

He tapped a finger on the instrument panel, thoughtfully. "We have to follow that course, though," he muttered. "We can't turn back to Mars—the ship that follows us, or is going to follow us, will certainly sight us, and rather than run the risk of losing us altogether, will blast us then and there. There are three superior planets this side of the Sun—" He abruptly took pencil and paper, made some calculations. "We couldn't make them on the fuel we've got. Venus is inimical, although accessible. To escape them at all," he went on, elevating his brows at the princess, who had been listening with great attention, "we'd have to go right through the boiling zone!"

"That would be suicide. Oh, Sharon," she weakened, "what else is there for us." Then she began to cry, softly, regally.

"We can't, we can't go through that boiling zone!" she exclaimed.

Acting on sudden impulse, Sharon took her hands in his. Since she didn't resist, he continued to hold them and look at them. They were small. They were white and delicate. They were the hands of a princess and the hands of a lovely, troubled girl at the same time. His eyes traveled to her face. Her eyes were deep and blue as a Terrestrial sky, as steady as the Earth itself.

"I am afraid I've fallen in love, princess," he said humbly.

She smiled frankly, but withdrew her hands. "There is nothing to be afraid of, Sharon," she told him sincerely. "I am glad you love me. I have met many men—I do not like any of them as well as you. If we arrive on Earth, I will need a man to show me its many wonders. It is very probable that I too will fall in love with you."

"That's a promise," he said quietly, and she nodded brightly.

CHAPTER III

Into the Heat!

THREE weeks after the little Hispano-Suiza had fled upward, fighting the gravitational hands of Mars, two other ships had put out from Deimos, one of the two moons of the red planet. They immediately assumed maximum acceleration.

Aboard those ships, there were, collectively, six men, and they were all high officials in the Martian state. Each of these ships had different courses, for, although they seemed at first to have the same course, they slowly but steadily diverged. One of the ships was following Sharon's course —the other was heading for the opposite side of the boiling zone, to take care of any lapses in the American's instructions.

On the ship that followed Sharon, the pilot asked of his superior, "Do you think Sharon will follow any other course than the one outlined?"

"Possible," the other nodded. "Even probable. But no matter what course he does follow, he can't escape. You see," he said easily, with quiet assurance in his statements, "if he lags, we'll catch up with him. If he goes around the Sun any other way, either myself or Goren, in the other ship, will note it. Since the inhabitants of Venus kill intruders without compunction, they can't land there.

"Mercury? On the other side of the Sun, same as Earth. No," he yawned, "only way they could elude us now would be by going through the boiling zone."

His subordinate laughed heartily at the witticism.

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Meanwhile Sharon was contemplating his almost hopeless chances. Suppose that some miracle enabled them to pass through the boiling zone? Within two or three million miles of the Sun. On their present course, the distance from Mars to Earth would be 253,202,000 miles, and by cutting in three million miles away from the Sun, they'd shave off about 20,000,000 miles from their flight, and save more than a week doing it! And they'd get to Earth in plenty of time, safe! Absurd speculations! It was quite impossible.

Sharon caught sight of two ships astern, and noted their diverging courses, and guessed the significance. They were going to approach from both sides!

More and more he sensed his impotence. What course, other than the one outlined, could they follow?

The dread crept up behind them. Each day they felt the growing intensity. At their present course, under maximum acceleration, they could make Earth in seventy-eight days. Nice of them to figure that far ahead.

"I don't mind dying, Sharon," the Princess Helen insisted. "I have been happy, for the first time in many months. But, of course, it would be so much nicer if we could continue to live." She added, laughingly mournful, "If only there were something to give us shade from the Sun, to protect us from the blistering heat."

Larry started to laugh with her. Abruptly he stopped laughing. He looked at her so long in absent-minded wonder that she was alarmed.

"Is anything wrong?" she queried, putting a hand on his arm.

"Jehosaphat!" he exploded, jumping as if sleep. "Wrong? No! Great Jove!" He was blubbering to himself. "But that can't be!" he continued to blubber. "There ain't no more miracles. Things like this don't happen to me, not to little Larry Sharon!"

Without a word of explanation, he went away. He ran up a companionway, emerged into the observatory. For an hour he trained his eye into the telescope. Watching, breathless. Three times he turned and made calculations. Three times he whispered, "Good!"

He left the observatory, ran down to the control room. Without a moment's hesitation, he began to change their course, going at it gently, for a sudden swerve at this velocity would provide an unendurable acceleration sidewise.

Finally, he swung around, and with pure enthusiasm grabbed the small hands of the princess again. This time, she did not object. "We're going through the boiling zone!" he announced. "1,200,000 miles from the Sun—but we're not going to boil. The new comet will take care of that!"

Larry gripped the arm of the Princess. "It's the new comet. A hyperbolic orbit, which means that it was drawn in toward the Sun from the space beyond the orbit of Pluto, even. Probably it'll vanish in the same way, for it has a tremendous velocity. But in the *meantime, there it is*! Our escort around the Sun, protecting our ship from the heat."

The comet fierily paralleled the course of the Hispano; it was not large, being but a half-million miles in diameter. But its tail, under the fierce, repelling light of the Sun on its rare constituents, spread backward in a steadily widening fan-shape that must have been ten millions of miles long.*

* Astronomically, this is considered a small tail, since many attain lengths of hundreds of millions of miles.—Ed.

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Far ahead was the nucleus, seemingly rushing straight at the Sun. The nucleus was small, emitted a bright light which it imparted to the envelope of tenuous gases surrounding it.

The Princess looked up at Sharon thoughtfully. "But," she spoke up, showing some little knowledge of astronomy, "a comet is—tenuous. Why, even on Mars they can see stars right through the nucleus."

"Which doesn't mean that there mightn't be chunks of matter large enough to berth this small ship—does it?" he asked.*

There's no scientific proof that a comet's nucleus, in many cases, might not be either solid all the way through, or composed of a more or less tight pack of smaller masses. I read an account of this in the news just before I left Earth—and from all reports it apparently has a small but substantial nucleus.

She shook her head and he went on: "Now this is a fast comet—faster than any previously discovered. It's going to cut close to the Sun—I only know of one that cut closer.**

"The great velocity of this comet is responsible for its close passage—the Sun doesn't move out of its way fast enough to arrange for less crowded quarters. But it's our salvation."

He began to make more changes in the ship's trajectory. The gloriously radiant tail of the comet—shining by the Sun's reflected light only—became more parallel to their own course. Now, by jockeying the ship in at an angle, Sharon could envelope it in the tail, and by following the path it presented, he could ease into the shade of the nucleus, just before it passed the outside limits of the boiling zone.

The glare of the Sun was becoming intolerable. They had to close all ports, and they put the refrigeration system on full force. Whoever had calculated the limits of the boiling zone had shaved a hair close.

Meanwhile the Martian pursuers drove deeper and faster into the celestial night.

The high commander, eye fixed to the eye-piece of the fore telescope, was puzzled.

"I don't understand this at all," he muttered to his subordinate. "There can't be any doubt that Sharon discovered our trap—he's changed his course entirely." He moved away from the eye-piece. "Take a look."

His subordinate frowned in incredulity. "He must be a fool. He's heading right into the boiling zone. It's suicide—"

The other shook his head. "From what I saw of Sharon, he isn't the kind to commit suicide. He's up to some trick," he grated. "Keep your eye on that ship, and the minute anything untoward happens—let me know!"

Two days later, he was called to the 'scope. "Look at that," the watcher said with tense calm. The commander looked once, then raised his head.

He slumped into a chair. "This may ruin our plans," he said. "They're right on the edge of the boiling zone, and they're headed right into it."

He jumped to his feet, face savage. "Put some power in those rockets. Get around the Sun as quick as you can and head for Earth. If we can overtake them—"

His subordinate shook his head

* Sir James Jeans holds that comets are probably composed of meteors held together by mutual attraction. If one were to collide with Earth, there would be no danger, just a magnificent meteoric display.—Ed.

**Sharon undoubtedly refers to the comet of 1860, which approached the sun within 1/163rd of Earth's orbit—less than a half-million miles.—Ed.

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doubtfully. "No, there is not a chance. They'll never get through that boiling zone. We might as well abandon the chase. We have forced them into a flaming death."

But the chase was not to be abandoned. Operating the rockets at full blasts, the Martian ship headed towards the earth, skirting the dangerous Boiling Zone.

All that day, Sharon sat at the controls, tense. He was within the tail, which, because it determinedly swung straight away from the Sun, necessitated a peculiar sidewise course down its length toward the comet's head. His problem was to equalize his velocity and acceleration to that of the comet.

And finally he made it, the boiling zone a mere half-million miles distant. The comet apparently came slowly drifting upward—and then stopped.

They saw its main mass now, shining with a cold phosphorescence. They saw huge masses slowly jostling back and forth, bumping, drifting back together again, but in general keeping a constant formation.

Through it, they saw more of the Sun than was concealed. Its glare and heat were still things to be dreaded. But in the lee of one of those masses there was safety.

Sharon brought the ship down gently onto a mass of matter that might have been no more than an exceptionally large meteorite, were it not for the phosphorescent motes that danced in an aura on its surface.

The Sun was blotted out, completely eclipsed.

To either side were the fantastic spangle of stars, the constantly swinging tail, the fuzzy halo of the comet, and an incredible number of tiny meteorites that at times rattled like hail against the ship.

They were safe, except for the danger presented by the constant internal movement of the nucleus, which was no more than two miles in circumference. Three times, the chunk they were riding threatened to penetrate into the middle portions of the comet's head. Four times, the masses they rode started to roll around the edge of the nucleus toward the Sunward side. Thus, seven times they nudged away and chose another resting place.

The comet penetrated deeper into the boiling zone, accelerating toward perihelion passage. Five days after entering the boiling zone, the comet came its closest to the Sun. During this time the two fugitives never once saw the Sun, nor were they affected by the awful heat the other side of the comet must have been experiencing.

They were now within the tail, which stretched straight away from the Sun they knew not how far. But it must have been an enormous distance; the length of the tail becomes greatest after a comet passes the Sun.

The comet began to emerge from the boiling zone. In four more days it was completely outside. Its course was straightening. The Sun had whipped it around like a small boy whips a stone on the end of a string, had given it a greater velocity than it previously possessed.

Far in the distance they sighted Earth.

"Great!" exulted Larry Sharon. "We're safe. Look at these figures. We cut off about 22,500,000 miles from the original course. We're safe!"

The glorious eyes of the Princess Helen sparkled. "And that is the Earth," she whispered, clasping her hands. "I have never been there. Larry," she laughed, "it was such a nice, obliging comet!"

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WORLD WITHOUT AIR

by Henry Kuttner

Jim Harding and Mat Pender faced sure death, from oxy-thirst. But they were certain they wouldn't give in to O-Corporation without a fight.

PEERING through the narrow, frost-misted window, Jim Harding bit down savagely on his pipe-stem as he saw the white tractor lurch into view. A flurry of bluesnow hid it momentarily; then the gale subsided. The storm was letting up. But it might be merely a lull, for nobody could make accurate weather forecasts on Planetoid 31, the most precarious foothold of human life in the System.

The tractor crawled into the shed, and the muffled thunder of its exhaust died. A space-suited figure emerged from the oval door in its side. The suit's transparent, dome-shaped helmet was immediately coated with blue rime, but Harding knew that his partner, Mat Pender, had returned—and with a message of failure. Pender's dragging, hopeless walk told its own story.

Harding's lean, hard-bitten face was suddenly flushed, and as swiftly became white. Without another glance out the window he moved to the gun closet and swung open the door. Strong hands clamped down like iron on the stock of a vicious sawed-off electro-rifle.

The pipe-stem cracked. Harding grinned bitterly and tossed the pipe aside. He hadn't allowed himself the luxury of a smoke for days. Not with the oxygen down to half a tank, and the supply ship overdue. Of course its tardiness was not accidental, Harding knew. Dain, owner of the O-Trust—the oxygen combine—had a definite purpose in making him wait for the oxygen that was synonymous with life on Planetoid 31.

Dain— Harding began to take the electro-rifle apart. A fleck of rust or a short circuit would be fatal now. Engrossed in his task, he scarcely heard the rumble of the shed door being closed and, some time later, the buzz that announced someone was in the airlock of the little cabin. When the signal rang again, Harding put the rifle under his arm and grudgingly ran some oxygen into the lock. Then he opened the valve.

Pender came in, coughing. His meaty red face was flushed, and brick-colored hair clung damply to his forehead. He started to speak, saw that Harding had turned away, and hesitated. Harding, oiling the firing mechanism, said,

"Well? Are you going to keep your bargain?"

Pender, unzippering his suit, forgot about it. He looked wide-eyed at the other.

"That's murder, Jim."

"It's self-preservation. And I gave

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you the chance you wanted. Morse couldn't spare any oxygen, could he?"

"He—I didn't ask him. He was down to a few tanks. He's got a wife and kids, you know—" Pender looked uncomfortable. "But maybe somebody else can spare—"

Harding swung around, fury glowing in his hard black eyes.

"You wasted enough oxygen and fuel taking the tractor to Morse's farm. There's nobody else for eighty miles; you know that." He waved down the other's protest. "Shut up, Mat. We're down to half a tank of oxy, and when the supply ship comes, we're going to take what we need—and not at Dain's new prices, either. I let you try to get some from Morse—and so what? Here!"

He thrust the rifle into Pender's unwilling hands.

"I'll need your help, if Dain sends his usual gang of thugs. Lucky we've got two guns."

PENDER laid the weapon aside and slowly crawled out of his suit. He found a cigarette, hesitated, and put it back carefully in the pack. Harding grinned savagely.

"Can't smoke," he mocked. "Wastes air. Yeah!"

"Morse feels the same way you do," Pender said. "He's laying for the O-Trust men. Says he'll shoot 'em on sight—he fired at me by mistake, in fact. But I was lucky."

"Good for Morse. If all the medicine farmers on this hell-forsaken world would get together, we could buck Dain. But he plays us off one against the other, cutting his oxygen rates to the guys who string along with him. And stringing along with Dain means giving him a half-interest in your farm."

Pender breathed a little painfully and leaned toward the window.

"Here's the supply tractor. Red ship, O-Trust insignia. Jim—" He turned abruptly. "This is murder!"

Harding sucked in his breath with an angry little sound. He rose, picked the rifle from the table, and glared at his partner.

"Listen," he said. "Just in case you don't know the set-up—nobody lives long on this planet without the O-Trust's regular delivery of oxygen. Dain keeps upping the prices. When I went to his headquarters last week—a hundred and eighty miles in a bluestorm—he said I'd have to pay a dollar more per cubic foot. I told him 'no'!"

"Of course," Pender muttered. "We don't make that sort of money medicine-farming."

"Raising plants and herbs that'll grow only on Planetoid 31—yeah. Dain wants a monopoly on the farming here. He offered to buy us out—and that blasted girl kept chiming in with him."

"She got in your hair, all right," Pender observed.

"Yeah. His new assistant, or something. I won't say she wouldn't wipe her feet on a medicine farmer — she probably would, if there wasn't a doormat handy. But here's the tractor. Remember — we need that oxygen!" Harding thrust the gun into Pender's big hands, and turned to the window.

The red ship had halted, and a space-suited figure was battling the wind toward the house. It went out of sight, and a moment afterward the buzzer rang. With a soundless oath Harding pumped air into the lock and stationed himself by the inner door.

"Have that gun ready," he cautioned, holding his own weapon steady. "Those thugs shoot first and talk later. Don't give 'em a chance."

He turned a lever, thrust the valve

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open, and with Pender beside him sprang into the lock. The first thing he saw was a murderous little electromatic leveled at his heart.

Almost he squeezed the trigger automatically. Then he heard Pender's grunt of surprise, and for the first time realized who his opponent was—a girl in a heat-suit, with the transparent hood thrown back over her shoulders, revealing a small, lovely face framed by chestnut curls.

It was the same girl Harding had seen a week before, in Dain's office. Now she had an electromatic in each hand.

There was no evidence of surprise in her cool glance. Frowning a little, she said, "Put them down, boys. Guns won't do you any good."

Harding didn't move. His eyes were searching. A mound of snow had been blown into the lock when the girl entered, and now lay in a blue heap at her feet. And Harding noticed a small bubble forming in the crust. . . .

HIS fingers shifted from the trigger, and the girl nodded in approval.

"That's it. Put 'em away and we can talk. I—"

There was a stir of sudden movement beneath her. The bluesnow churned as a sharp brown muzzle was thrust up into the warmer air. The girl involuntarily glanced down, and at that moment Harding leaped.

He smashed the rifle down on the slim arms, with enough force to knock the electromatics from the gloved fingers that held them. The girl gave a soft cry of pain and dived for the weapons. Harding stopped her, which was like stopping a pint-sized wildcat.

But at last he held a panting, unresisting prisoner, while Pender, having collected the various weapons, led the way into the interior of the house. Harding pulled at the girl's arm; she came along willingly enough. He sat her down in a chair and grinned at her.

"Saved by a snowhog," he mocked. "Lucky that pig blew in with you."

At the girl's involuntary look of surprise Harding bent to scoop up a small, soft-bodied creature shaped somewhat like an ordinary hedgehog, save that its skin was smooth and covered with large pores. It had crept out from the snowbank in the lock and wandered into the room.

Harding chuckled. "One of the few imported animals that survived on *Planetoid 31*. Came from Venus—they're used to an atmosphere heavy on hydrogen. But some of 'em got acclimated here, and they hibernate under the snow in winter."

He set the snowhog down on the table, amid the remnants of supper, and the little creature hastily waddled over to a glass half full of water and tried to cram himself into it. He failed, but managed to drink all the water.

Harding turned back to the girl, and his eyes hardened.

"So Dain sent you out, eh? Who are you, anyway?"

"The name is Susan Dain," she responded, ignoring Pender's low whistle of surprise.

"Don't tell me you went and married that buzzard," the big redhead requested.

"Fred Dain is my half-brother. I came out here to help him—"

"Two slave-drivers instead of one," Harding snapped. "I get it. He figured we wouldn't start anything with a dame—that we'd be pushovers and pay up with a smile. Or maybe he wanted to save his thugs from getting hurt."

Susan shrugged and started to light a cigarette. Harding knocked it from her lips.

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"We can't waste oxygen—till we get some more, anyhow. Where is it?"

"Outside in the tractor — with a couple of 'thugs'. It'll be delivered as soon as you pay for it. You know the price."

Harding nodded. "I see. Well, listen to this. We haven't got the money, and we've just half a tank of oxy. So tell your friends to deliver, *pronto*." He gestured to the radio set in the corner.

"Sorry."

"Okay. Then you'll stay here till the oxy's delivered."

SUSAN settled back comfortably in her chair.

"I'm 'way ahead of you. I'm a psychologist, farmer, in my own sweet little way—and if I don't return to the tractor in five minutes, it'll head back to headquarters. This is the last farm on our rounds."

Harding's brows contracted. "And you'll stay here—with half a tank of oxy? Know how long we'd last?"

The girl's foot tapped impatiently on the floor.

"You're not a good bluffer, man. You've got the money—and you'll pay up." She nodded toward the window. "See? There's the tractor pulling out."

It was true. The red leviathan wobbled slowly away into the blue, shifting curtain of snow, the mutter of its exhaust dying.

"Well?" Susan asked. "Shall I radio them to come back? Or—"

Harding didn't answer. He stared at the window. The drifts fell endlessly outside. The storm was rising. If there were only some way of extracting oxygen from the bluesnow itself! But electrolysis wouldn't work on the stuff; it was just another freak of this bitter, desolate world.

Pender got up and wandered uneasily around the room. Time dragged on. Finally Susan said,

"You'd better make up your mind before the tractor gets too far. Radios don't work well in these bluestorms."

Nobody answered her. She bit her lip angrily; then rose and moved about aimlessly. She was ignored.

"Make yourself at home," Harding said ironically.

Susan took his words literally enough, and her sharp gaze was probing as she strolled here and there. Eventually she went into the tractor shed which, since the door was shut, was safe enough.

When she returned, the look in her eyes had changed.

"Harding!"

"Yeah?" He turned lazily.

"Where's your oxygen?"

"There. That tank."

"But—the rest of it!"

"That," said Harding with bitter emphasis, "is all there is. There isn't any more."

"You—you must have a reserve supply! You wouldn't commit suicide by letting the tractor go off—"

Pender interrupted, "Lady, we're out of oxy and nearly out of money. Jim wasn't lying to you."

"Is that the truth?" The light eyes were probing as Susan turned to Harding. "Is it?"

"Sure. Next trip your pals will find us all here — frozen stiff and suffocated."

The girl's lips set tightly. She went to the radio, flung the switch, and began to call a message.

"Tractor Three. . . . Susan Dain calling . . . Tractor Three . . ."

A voice broke in, scarcely audible through heavy static.

"Miss Dain! We've been trying to contact you—can you hear us?"

"I—yes. What's wrong?"

"We cracked up." Static drowned

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the voice for a moment. ". . . gulley. Broke a tread and the oxygen's leaking. We're afraid it'll get to the exhaust and ignite. Our radio won't reach headquarters in this storm. Can you—"

Susan turned a look of silent inquiry on Harding, who shook his head.

"We can't reach far with this set. It's underpowered. And in a blue-storm—"

HE was interrupted by a sharp cry from the transmitter. The static faded, and the voice sounded startlingly clear in the silent room.

"The oxygen's caught! We—"

A bellowing report ripped out; then the radio was still, save for the crackling of static. Susan caught her lower lip between her teeth. Her hand went up to her throat.

"God!" Pender gasped. "Their tanks must have gone up!"

The girl asked, in a strained voice, "Do you think they have a chance?"

Harding snapped, "You haven't been on Planetoid 31 long, sister. Those poor devils are dead all over the place by now. It's blackout for all of us!"

Susan turned back to the radio, trying frantically to reach headquarters, 180 miles away. She gave up at last.

Harding favored her with a sardonic grin.

"Too bad Dain's not here instead of you. I hate to think of that rat still living after I've cashed in."

The girl had regained all her cool self-control. Frowning, she stared into space.

"Half a tank of oxygen — we can't make it to headquarters on that, can we?"

"Not in this storm," Pender told her. "The going's too rough. It'd take us twice as long to make the trip as it would under normal conditions. If the storm died, we might make it — I dunno."

"Isn't there another farm near here?"

The redhead nodded. "Morse's. Didn't you leave any tanks at his place?"

Susan scowled. "No. We got a radio from him—he said he'd shoot us if we came within range. I didn't believe him, but he wasn't lying. He—he'd planted mines, too."

"I know," Pender said, and exchanged grim glances with Harding. "Morse buried dynamite all around his place. He told me if I'd showed up a few hours later, it'd have been just too bad. He was laying for the O-Trust ship, all right."

"The man's mad!" Susan burst out.

Harding grunted. "Sure. He's got a wife and kids, and can't make more than a living out of medicine-farming. If he doesn't pay Dain's rates—*your* rates—he knows what'll happen. He's crazy, sure, the poor devil."

"I feel sorrier for rattlesnakes," the girl said, in cold fury. "Medicine farmers . . . scum! Harding! I'll make a bargain with you. I don't want to die any more than you do. Let me use your tractor to get to Morse's place, and I'll guarantee you free oxygen as long as you stay on Planetoid 31."

Harding's eyes were veiled as he considered.

"You don't want to die, eh? Well—you'd never make it to Morse's. I'll take you up on that, sister. Mat! Snap into your suit."

"Huh?" The big man looked puzzled.

"We're pulling out—all of us. Morse has enough oxy to last us all for a week, and as soon as the storm dies we can radio headquarters. Come on!"

The three were galvanized into activity. Hastily they donned their heated

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suits and glassite helmets. Harding paused to scoop up the snowhog and carry the little beast outside through the lock. He stared around till he located a cluster of blisters in the bluish, frigid crust, and then dropped the creature there. It immediately burrowed down out of sight, its motions growing slower and slower as it disappeared.

HARDING stood for a moment staring at the spot where the snowhog had vanished. Queer animals. This one would hibernate all winter; and then migrate, with its companions, to the great swamps into which the slopes drained.

"Damned little hydrogen eater," Harding muttered, and joined the others in the tractor.

Pender had already taken the precious tank of oxygen into the ship. There was little space in the cramped quarters, and even when Harding mounted the small ladder to the transparent turret, he could see practically nothing through the murk. He swung himself uncomfortably into the control seat and sent the tractor lurching forward, dividing his gaze between a compass and the blue maelstrom outside. It would be easy to fall into a gulley without seeing it.

But he knew the path he must take, knew it by heart. Very often he had shuttled back and forth between Morse's place and his own. If he knew the way to headquarters as well, it would be possible to get there before the oxygen gave out. Well, that couldn't be done in the bluestorm. Their only hope was Morse. And Morse had set dynamite traps. . . .

Harding found himself thinking of the girl. Arrogant, self-sufficient, and officious. Far different from her half-brother Fred Dain in appearance, but in character quite like the owner of the O-Trust. Unpleasantly so. Harding's hard young face was bleak as the icy hell outside the ship.

He stopped the tractor and climbed down the ladder. Without a word he donned a heat-suit and released a scanty supply of oxygen into the feed tank high on the back of the suit. The others watched him from their seats.

"What are you doing?" Susan asked at last. Pender glanced at her.

"He's going to walk the rest of the way. If we took the ship any further, we'd be blown sky-high. A man on foot can get through safely, though."

"Oh," Susan said, remembering the dynamite mines Morse had laid.

Harding nodded at his partner, clamped the glassite helmet into place, and stepped into the tiny airlock, closing the door behind him. He turned on the heat unit, feeling a warm glow course over his skin. Oxygen trickled slowly from the little tank. Harding opened the outside door and was blinded by bluesnow that blasted in on him.

Quickly he stepped out on the surface. He sank to his knees before finding footing on solid crust. It was difficult to see more than a few feet in the filtered, pale light, but occasionally there would be a rift in the gale. During such a lull Harding made out the distant, squat bulk of Morse's farm.

He advanced warily. The white tractor vanished before he had gone far. The wind was the worst; it buffeted him with harsh, unexpected blows, and knocked him sprawling twice. Yet he kept on doggedly, making steady though gradual progress.

The veil of storm lifted momentarily, and sharply through the roar of wind Harding heard a faint crack. Simultaneously something tugged slightly at his shoulder. Again came the distant report, and snow puffed up at Hard-

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ing's feet.

A RIFLE! Morse was firing at the intruder, mistaking him for an O-Trust man. Perhaps he thought Dain's hirelings were returning after their initial failure to outbluff him. At any rate, Harding thought as he flung himself face-down in the snow, it would be suicide to keep on now.

He blinked smarting eyes. There was no radio on the tractor, nor did he have a portable set in his suit. Those things cost money, which medicine farmers didn't have. He tried clearing the rime from outside his helmet, but it was a futile task, nor could Morse have recognized him at this distance. In a bluestorm everybody looked alike. Harding felt a pain in his throat and blinked again. Funny. It felt like—

Like oxy-thirst!

His body tight with sudden apprehension, Harding flung back an exploratory hand. The oxygen tank on his back was empty. And his probing, gloved fingers found a long rip in the shoulder of the suit. His arm, he realized abruptly, was already numb from the bitter, freezing cold.

But this couldn't be happening! Not with oxygen and heat not half a mile away, both in the tractor and in Morse's farm. It was impossible irony. It wasn't real—

It *was* real — and the oxy-thirst clutched Harding by the throat!

Gasping, the man flung himself to his knees. The storm veiled him from Morse's eyes, so there was no danger of rifle fire. Yet the immediate peril was far worse. For Harding could not drag himself upright. Already weak for lack of air, he fell into the blue, feathery surface of the snow.

His left arm was numb and without feeling. The icy tendrils spiraled through his flesh, reaching for his heart. Simultaneously dry tentacles of pain clawed down from his throat. Like hands reaching, to clutch his heart and stop it. . . .

He strained to breathe. It was a choking agony. His lips drew back in a mirthless grin of torture. He tried to hold his breath, and when he could resist no longer, found no relief. A sick, whirling blackness was crawling toward him, folding down to smother him, and he was suddenly very tired.

Air . . . *for God's sake, air!*

He saw the blisters on the snow without realizing their significance. He must have crawled a few yards without conscious volition. And his distended eyes glared down at dozens of puffy blisters in the bluesnow. What did that mean? He had once known. . . . It didn't matter. There was almost a pleasure now in the pain that tore at him. Its sharp intensity was dulling. And he was sliding down, somehow. . . .

Blisters in the snow. Snowhogs. Small animals from Venus that lived on hydrogen. A snowhog that drank the water from a tumbler. . . .

Air!

Recklessly, with numb, stiff fingers, Harding tore at the fastenings of his helmet. He managed to get it part way off. His face suddenly was bathed in stinging flames. Paralyzing cold . . . but that didn't matter now. The only thing that mattered was air.

HE dug down in the bluesnow. The little animals weren't far. Harding broke through into a small cave and felt something indescribable breathe up at him—oxygen. He sucked it in with hungry greed, thrusting his face deep into the snow and breathing the life-giving oxy deep into his lungs. Renewed vigor flowed through him.

But the oxygen was gone now. He could get more—there had been a way.

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If he could remember. . . . The snowhogs, of course! They lived on hydrogen. They drank water and assimilated the hydrogen, releasing the oxygen as waste matter. The large pores on their skins excreted oxygen. And the bluesnow was H_2O, even though electrolysis wouldn't work on it.

But when the snowhogs hibernated, their metabolism was slowed down and they couldn't eat H_2O or release oxygen. The snowhog back at the farm had revived in the warm air. Warmth—

Harding turned on his heating unit full strength. He didn't know how long it would last, but it was necessary to take the chance. He scooped up a heap of snowhogs and bluesnow in both arms, hugged the small animals to his warming suit, and managed to lower his helmet till it covered the upper part of his face. The hogs began to wriggle and stir. A breath of oxygen drifted up and was caught in the helmet; Harding's starved lungs drank it in hungrily.

He staggered erect, still cradling his life-giving burden. The animals, warmed into sluggish activity, began to devour the bluesnow — and the heat speeded up their basal metabolism. Oxygen—waste matter to them—was released as they assimilated the hydrogen from the snow, and much of that oxygen rose into Harding's helmet. He waited a moment, breathing deeply, and then lurched forward down the slope. No use to head for Morse's cabin, of course.

The white tractor, capped by bluesnow, came into view. With a gasp of relief Harding flung himself into the lock and shut the valve after him. His stiff fingers found the warning buzzer. Pender must have been waiting by the stopcock inside, for immediately oxygen came hissing into the lock.

The inner door opened. Harding stumbled over the threshold, dropping the snowhogs to writhe excitedly on the floor. His face was a drawn mask.

Pender caught his partner by the arms.

"Jim! What happened to you?"

"Nothing," Harding croaked. He was tearing off his insulating garment. "Get me the other suit, quick! And a shovel!"

He snatched a fair-sized wooden box from a corner and emptied a miscellany of equipment from it.

Pender, jaw agape, was back with suit and shovel. Harding donned the former, nodded reassuringly, and valved some oxygen into it.

"Be back in a few minutes," he said, and departed, carrying the box and the shovel with him.

He did not go far. He began to dig at random in the bluesnow, and at last found what he wanted. After that he shoveled furiously till he had uncovered a patch of hard, frozen soil in which grew a cluster of spiky plants. They resembled cacti, save that their leaves were triangular and pointed. "Frenchfries", they were named by the farmers, because of the shape of their pulpy leaves.

HARDING carefully uprooted several dozen plants and then filled the wooden box with soil—a difficult task, even though the frenchfries had kept the ground from freezing entirely. With his burden he went back to the ship, keeping his face grim, though he felt like grinning in triumph. Inside the tractor cabin he stripped off the suit and tossed it to Susan.

"Get into it—quick!" And as she hesitated: "Damn it, do as I say!"

The girl obeyed silently, her lips firmly compressed. Harding pointed to the airlock.

"Outside. You've oxygen enough

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for ten minutes. Wait near the ship till the time's up. Then come back."

"B-but—"

"Don't ask questions!"

Harding's voice was a command. He waited till Susan had disappeared and the outer door had thudded shut. Then he turned to Pender.

"Come on, fella! We've got to work fast. I've an idea that may smash Dain and his O-Trust wide open."

The redhead stared. "Have you gone batty, Jim?"

Harding was ripping the heat unit out of the spare suit, the one Morse's bullet had torn.

"Hell, no. Shut up and give me a hand before that dame comes back. I don't trust her, and she'd give the whole show away if she knew what we do."

He bent over the box, burying the heat unit in the soil till it was invisible. The control button, however, lay just under the surface in one corner, and could be depressed by a slight motion. Then Harding picked up the snowhogs one by one and buried them in the soil. They wriggled a bit, but soon relapsed into tightly curled drowsiness. Harding covered them over and planted the frenchfries above them, till the pulpy brownish leaves almost hid the dirt that filled the box.

"What'd you say?" he asked, conscious that Pender had been speaking.

"The girl. Listen, Jim, we got her all wrong. That crooked half-brother of hers has been stuffing her full of lies. She's new on Planetoid 31, and Dain's made her believe we medicine farmers are the scum of the System. She started asking me questions about Morse and his family, and—and—well, the girl's all right. She knows the real set-up now, and she's with us."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. We had her wrong—"

Harding nodded toward the lock.

"Here she is. Let her in. But keep your mouth valved. I don't trust that girl; she's too smart. Let her in, Mat. The storm's dying a bit, and we're heading for Trust headquarters. Go on, don't stall!"

LUCK was with the medicine farmers. The storm did die, after an hour of intermittent gales, and the tractor went racing over the surface of Planetoid 31 to an empty horizon. Soon it grew dark, but powerful search-beams warned the travelers of gulleys and boulders in their path.

NOT long after nightfall they reached O-Trust headquarters, a group of well-built, airtight cabins, guarded by a miniature fortress that was the oxygen storehouse. The tractor lurched into a shed and halted as the door rolled down and air hissed through valves.

Harding paused long enough to take a can of salt from a shelf and place it in his pocket. Then, carrying the heavy box of dirt and frenchfries, he led the way out of the ship, Pender and Susan trailing him. The girl had been very silent during the trip and thoughtful as well. Harding knew that because he found himself stealing surreptitious glances at her. Too bad she was one of the Trusters—because it would be easy to fall for her, under different circumstances. Well, what the hell. . . .

Harding gave the box to Pender, and glanced at Susan's electromatic, which he had stuck in his belt. Then they passed through the locks and were in the office of the Oxygen Trust, a well-furnished, comfortable room with a big desk in the center and a smaller one against the wall. The latter belonged to Susan, Harding knew.

Behind the big desk sat Fred Dain. The slightest edge of a smile lay on

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him, and his smoothly shaven face and light fabric clothes contrasted sharply with the worn garments of the two medicine farmers.

Harding said, "Put it on his desk, Mat." And Dain's eyebrows rose as the grimy box was slammed down on polished mahogany.

"Well, Harding?" the Trust man asked quietly.

"Just this. I've found a way to smash you, Dain. You've made plenty of dough out of your oxygen monopoly. Well, that's all over now. You're washed up. I'm giving you a chance to sign over the O-Trust to the medicine farmers of Planetoid 31, collectively."

Dain's lips were still curled in an amused smile.

"Won't the farmers pay me a cent for my little business?"

"Yeah. A dollar. One buck, to make the transaction legal."

The seated man glanced at Susan and then back to Harding.

"If you've anything to say, say it. Or else get out."

"Right! You've got a monopoly on oxygen here. Correct? You're making money because the farmers can't get oxygen anywhere else. Right again. Now, suppose I'd found a way of manufacturing oxygen cheaply, so that every farmer could use it, and wouldn't need to buy from you."

Dain's eyes changed. He let his gaze fall to the box of plants.

Harding thrust his forefinger into the soil in one corner of the box—and felt the heat-unit control click softly over. He took the tin of salt from his pocket.

"This is the answer, Dain. Right under our eyes, only we never guessed what it meant till now. Frenchfries, growing wild all over the planet, just—weeds."

The Trust man said, very softly, "What are you driving at?"

Harding sprinkled salt over the frenchfries.

"Get a whiff of that!"

Dain leaned forward over the desk and sniffed. For a second his impassive mask dropped.

"Oxygen! But how—Let's see that can!"

He snatched the tin from the other's hands and tasted the white crystals.

"Sodium chloride," Harding affirmed. "Miles of it in the swamps here—not to mention the salt mines. All the farmers have to do is cultivate frenchfries, keep a supply of salt on hand—and they get oxygen. So—" His gaze lashed out. "So you'd better sign over the O-Trust!"

DAIN sank back in his chair, interlacing his fingers.

"Suppose I don't."

Harding felt his stomach drop like an elevator, but he kept his face impassive.

"Okay. Stay on, if you want. You realize how much the farmers love you. Right now they don't dare move a finger, because you've got a stranglehold on them through the monopoly. But when we have free oxygen on 31 and the farmers can go on living without you. . . .

"Do you remember Morse, Dain? And Andreasson, whose sister died of oxy-thirst while he was away in his tractor? Do you think your guns can keep men like that away from your throat, Dain?"

For a full minute the room was utterly silent. Then:

"Why do you want the Trust?"

"You've good, sound buildings here. It's centrally located. It's got facilities, and we can make it the headquarters of the new farmers' association."

Dain's face was flushed—by the increase of oxygen in the air. This, per-

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haps, turned the balance. Without a word he reached for paper and pen and scratched out a contract.

He signed it; Harding and Pender read and signed in turn, and Harding tossed a dollar across the desk.

"Okay," he said, pocketing the document. "I'll give you a week to clear out. If I were you, I'd go—far."

Without waiting for an answer, he picked up the box of frenchfries and started for the door. It would not do to leave them, for then Dain might discover the buried snowhogs, revived by the heat and now emitting oxygen.

The trust man said suddenly, "Wait, Harding," and stood up.

Harding turned, still holding the box. He saw Pender, at his side, stiffen. For Dain had an electro-gun in his hand, and it was aimed unwaveringly.

With a soft little cry, Susan leaped across the room to her desk. Harding did not look at her. He was wondering if he could drop the box and go for his gun. Pender, by fatal ill luck, was unarmed.

Dain said, "Probably you two are the only ones who know about this discovery. I may be wrong, but the chance is worth taking. If you two die—"

His eyes changed. Harding saw his finger tighten on the trigger, and the medicine farmer tensed his muscles for a hopeless leap to one side. It would be useless, he knew, for Dain was an expert marksman. In a split second the gun would—

Crack! The spiteful report snapped through the room. Harding almost felt the shock of the electrobolt, and found himself staring in blank amazement at the reeling figure of Dain, who went staggering back, shaking a hand that was a charred, smoking ember. The gun was fused on the floor.

Harding looked, then, at Susan. A drawer in her desk was open, and she stood holding a blue-steel electromatic that still trembled with the violence of the explosion.

Pender said weakly, "I told you she was on our side."

"T-that's right," Susan gasped—and quietly fainted.

Harding put the box of frenchfries down on the floor. He jerked his thumb to Dain, who was leaning on his desk and groaning.

"Fix him up, Mat. Bandage his hand. He's got to be ready to catch the next space-liner out of here. I've got to take care of my fiancée."

The redhead stared. "Uh — *what?* Your fiancée?"

Harding grinned as he lifted the unconscious girl in his arms.

"Sure. She doesn't know it yet, but —give her time, fella! Give her time!"

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119

The nice, obliging comet carried them a little farther, and then, hand in hand, they regretfully bid it goodbye. It went away, a great shining nebulosity 500,000 miles in diameter, its 10,000,000 mile tail swerving distastefully away from the Sun into whose proximity it had so closely ventured.

They turned the ship Earthward.

Three thousand miles from its security, they saw, in the stern telescope, a great ship that even now was braking its speed. It had come around the boiling zone, but as for catching those who had gone through it, they knew it couldn't be done now.

END

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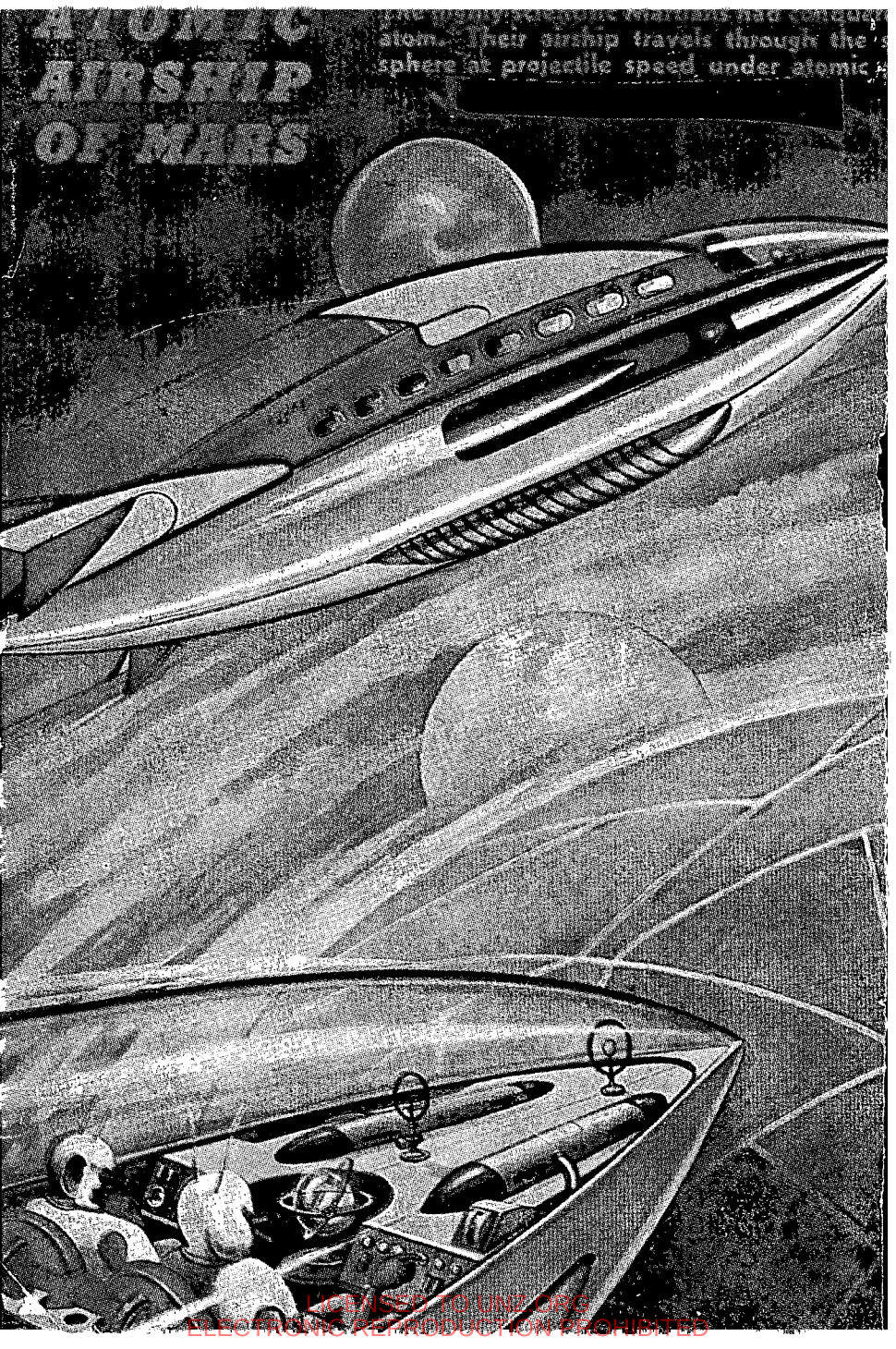

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